

00:00:00	Music	Transition	Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.
00:00:01	Promo	Promo	<b>Speaker:</b> <i>Bullseye with Jesse Thorn</i> is a production of <a href="http://MaximumFun.org">MaximumFun.org</a> and is distributed by NPR.
00:00:14	Jesse Thorn	Host	<i>[Music fades out.]</i> I'm Jesse Thorn. It's <i>Bullseye</i> .
00:00:16	Music	Transition	"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	There's a new movie out now, called <i>C'mon C'mon</i> . It's written and directed by my guest, Mike Mills. <i>C'mon C'mon</i> centers on two characters: Johnny, played by Joaquin Phoenix, and his nine-year-old nephew Jesse, played by Woody Norman. They aren't close, but circumstances force them together. Jesse's mom needs Johnny's help. She's in LA taking care of Jesse but Jesse's dad is in San Francisco and he's having a manic episode. She asks Johnny to take care of the kid while she tried to get her ex into the hospital.
			At first, Johnny moves in with Jesse in LA. It's not an easy fit, but they start to bond. Then, Johnny decides to take Jesse on the road for work. It's a film about the extraordinary burdens of parenthood, the ways those burdens change parents, and about kids and how amazing and resilient they can be—even in the face of serious trauma.
00:01:24	Sound Effect	Transition	In this scene, Johnny is reading Jesse a little bit of <i>The Wizard of Oz</i> before bed. Music swells and fades.
00:01:25	Clip	Clip	<b>Johnny (<i>C'mon C'mon</i>):</b> "And white is the witch color. So, we know you are a friendly witch." Dorothy didn't know what to say—Dorothy did not know what to say to this. For all the people seemed to think her witch and she was—"
			<b>Jesse:</b> <i>[Interrupting.]</i> Why aren't you married?
			<b>Johnny:</b> <i>[Beat.]</i> Um. I was with—I was with somebody for a long time. Lisa. "And she knew very well she was only an ordinary little girl who'd come by the chance of a cyclone into a strange land."
			<b>Jesse:</b> <i>[Talking over him.]</i> Did you love her?
			<b>Johnny:</b> I still do.
			<b>Jesse:</b> Then why did you break up?
00:02:08	Sound Effect	Transition	<b>Johnny:</b> <i>[Sighs.]</i> I don't know. Music swells and fades.
00:02:09	Jesse	Host	Mike Mills, welcome back to <i>Bullseye</i> . I'm happy to have you back on the show.
00:02:12	Mike Mills	Guest	I'm so happy to be here.
00:02:13	Jesse	Host	Congratulations on this amazing movie.

00:02:15	Mike	Guest	Aw, thank you, man.
00:02:16	Jesse	Host	So, you have a kid that's about the age of the kid in this movie.
			Were you thinking of your own kid when you were writing it?
00:02:24	Mike	Guest	That's the seed of it all, all the experiences that my kid led me into
			and all the deepening of my understanding of myself and the world
			that your kid tends to do to you, the parent and the adult. And I
			wanted to try to describe that space or try to hold onto it, actually,
			too. 'Cause it does—it does all evaporate. It goes away. It goes by.
00:02:48	Jesse	Host	Yeah, I mean there's—the main adult character in the film is a radio
			producer or a podcast producer and there's a moment where he
			tries to convince the kid <i>[chuckling]</i> that what's great about
			recording is holding onto things.
			<i>[Mike affirms.]</i>
			And I wondered if you just wrote that in there. You're like, "I'm just
			gonna put a light on this." <i>[Chuckles.]</i>
00:03:11	Mike	Guest	So, obviously that's one of the themes of the whole film, right? Is
			like your kid's life whizzes by, completely changes yours, and they
			don't remember so much of it. And there's constantly all these like
			little, mini griefs. Like to being an adult. Like, oh the five-year-old
			version is gone forever and that was a rad version. You know? And
			the seven-year-old version is gone forever. So, it's like this crazy
			feeling. That line, though, that came from Starlee Kine, who is a
			radio journalist, radio person. She read the script and she was just
			sort of helping me just talk about it. And she said that thing of like,
			"One thing I love about recording is that you get to kind of keep it."
			And so, I—you know, I said, "Can I put that in the script?" Put it in
			and then Joaquin kind of did his own version of it. But yeah, that's
			from Starlee.
00:03:57	Jesse	Host	When you had a kid, did you feel like you were ready to go?
00:04:01	Mike	Guest	Yeah, I was 46. So, I was like really ready to go. I was really—I felt
			like I had missed the train on the whole being with a person and
			having a kid boat. Right? So, I was like very grateful, very just like—
			just so happy.
00:04:16	Jesse	Host	How did it compare to what you thought it would be like? 'Cause
			that's a lot of buildup, 46. <i>[Chuckles.]</i>
00:04:22	Mike	Guest	Yeah! Well, I was just super down for all of it, I have to say. I was—
			it's like—it's like the—I, who struggle with meaning, fullness, or
			holding onto meaning, sustaining mean. It's like, all of the sudden
			there's this thing in my life that like every single minute's just utterly
			meaningful to me. Even if we're like arguing about brushing her
			hair, I'm like—I'm down for this argument. It's like totally beautiful
			and engaging and I'm just—I'm in. So, I've just loved it. I am like—I
			can't get enough. So, that's me.
			<i>[They laugh.]</i>
00:04:51	Jesse	Host	What was the scariest part about it, to you?
00:04:54	Mike	Guest	Oh, there's so many scary parts. And that gets kind of personal in a
			way that I can't share because it's other people's lives, too. But
			you're never more vulnerable, I think, than when you're a parent.
			Right? You're never more vulnerable than when you're in love and
			then you're never more vulnerable than when you're taking care of
			someone who you have to like literally keep them alive for a number
			of years. Right? And then they need you so badly. That's almost the

scariest thing, right? Like to be really responsible or whatever. It's not all you. They have their own journey and their own soul. They came with their own mission. It does feel like, to me, that you're still this cosmic responsibility that's nothing like you've had before in your life.

00:05:43	Jesse	Host	Like, I don't sleep, still. Right? My kid's nine. If there's like—if a toothpick dropped in my neighbor's house, like I wake up. You know? <i>[Chuckles.]</i> And like fully ready. Yeah.
00:05:45	Mike	Guest	Grab the baseball bat. <i>[Chuckles.]</i>
00:05:54	Jesse	Host	Not the baseball bat, just like with intention towards wherever my kid's sleeping. You know. Just your radar never really turns off. One of the things that I found very moving about this film, which is—you know, this kid named Jesse's father is bipolar and going through a manic episode over the course of the film—was the way that his uncle, Johnny, has to look at how trauma is shaping this kid in real time.

*[Mike agrees.]*

00:06:28	Mike	Guest	And try to grasp what he does and doesn't have power over. Mm-hm. What Johnny or Jesse doesn't have power over? Or both, I guess.
00:06:31	Jesse	Host	What Johnny doesn't have power over.

*[Mike agrees.]*

00:06:39	Mike	Guest	I mean, Jesse barely has—you know, <i>[chuckling]</i> an eight-year-old is really developing agency. You know what I mean? Yeah. Yeah, yeah. Yeah. I think throughout the film—because he's not a parent, right? He's an estranged uncle that becomes the primary caretaker and alone. Like on the road, alone. So, he's guessing at everything. Right? And I love that, as a character, but it's also completely accurate to my experience as a father. When you're the father of one kid, you have no idea what's coming next. I think people have two or three kids, maybe they have like a little bit of idea, but I'm sure it's different every time in ways that are completely surprising.
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So, I found that contrivance of having an uncle as the lead in my story, which was something I did to get it away from my life—right?—to create distance between me and my loved ones. But it became like actually a very accurate tool to describe fatherhood, to me. That you never know what's right, you never know how to do it. It feels like, to me. Even if you're there and you're totally connected and you're totally in, it's like you have no lack of excitement or love or commitment. It still is guessing.

00:07:56	Jesse	Host	So, when this like really heavy thing comes up and you're wondering how it's impacting this nine-year-old's psyche, soul, who is—while so expressive, is also completely cryptic and mysterious. Right? You directly ask a kid what's going on, they're not gonna tell you most of the time. So. They might—they often don't know. I mean, that's—
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00:07:59	Mike	Guest	Yeah. Or even if they know, I think I've experienced a lot where they know—for whatever reason, it's like some combination between boring and vulnerable-making to tell you.
			<i>[Jesse giggles and agrees.]</i>
			So, they're just gonna take the other route, take any other route. At least, my trickster likes to do that. Just like any other way. Yeah. And to me, that—having a character who's dealing with that is a heightened version of something that I feel all the time with what exactly, positive and negative—and I say negative with like love and not that it's bad or should be like kept at a distance. It's like life, right? It's like any plant has positive and negative or any tree. So, like what do you inherit from your parents? You know? What do you uncontrollably inherit? Including like the darkness or the things that you—that are going to be difficult for you. Right?
			And then simultaneously, what are you giving? You know? What are you unconsciously, unintentionally giving to your kid? And that lack of control, you have that on both sides, I feel like. I think that's something that I think about a lot. And that character was a way to kind of—yeah, have that in the film.
00:09:08	Jesse	Host	Did you think about what it was like to be an eight-year-old when you were making the movie? Like, your own experience of childhood?
00:09:14	Mike	Guest	Um, well he's—he's nine.
00:09:16	Jesse	Host	Nine, thank you.
00:09:17	Mike	Guest	And I did have an example right in front of me that I was constantly dealing with. And they were actually six when I was writing this, but anyways, I had a kid in front of me. You know. And a kid consciousness. So, I was—
00:09:27	Jesse	Host	And part of the time was like quarantine time, right?
00:09:30	Mike	Guest	No, that was after. That was editing during that point. But writing and—I had—so, I had that. And not just my kid, all the kids that your kid introduces you to and just like childhood, the way that you're immersed in a way that you rarely are as an adult, even if you don't have kids. So, just like volunteering at school or just hanging around with friends' kids, you're dunked into that consciousness. Right? And so, there's lots of things I heard, or I glanced or I—or I felt. Right? That, from all that world—not just my kid—that I incorporated. One of my favorite parts of the script is the orphan story. There's this orphan story that the kid like to do where it's like a roleplaying thing where you're—his parents had children that died and the orphanage sent him to replace those kids and he needs to know everything those kids did, to do it right.
			That's something that Aaron Dessner's daughter, Ingrid, does. And so, I learned about that hanging out at their house, and Aaron did the music for the film, so we were together. And I said, you know, "Oh, that's amazing." And it feels like Jungian. Right? It feels—there's something about it I was just very attracted to. So, I asked Ingrid and Aaron if I could use that, and they helped me like get it verbatim like into the script. And then, it was real interesting sharing that story with people or just talking about it. Like, so many—either adults did it as children or people tell me like, "Oh, my kid does the orphan—some version of the orphan game." So, yeah.

00:10:51	Jesse	Host	When you see those things, do you find yourself only seeing them as an adult outsider or do you feel them empathetically?
00:11:02	Mike	Guest	You mean like and especially like as I'm writing? Or just—?
00:11:05	Jesse	Host	Yeah, yeah. That kid stuff. And just as you're seeing all these kids that are around you because you have a kid. Like, do you see things from their eyes as well as from yours?
00:11:14	Mike	Guest	I guess that's part of the gig of writing. Right? You do kind of—I don't consider myself like a deep writer. <i>[Chuckles.]</i> I'm like a good listener and then a good editor. I'm good at like finding objects and putting them into a shape that makes a story. Like or at least that's what I like. That makes me feel like really mentally healthy. You know? Like I'm receiving and I'm like heightened awareness of like what's going on. That's—I like all that.
			But you do channel, or whatever it is. You do kind of get into this—you're wearing the mask of the kid and you kind of just keep going. And maybe you heard someone say two sentences, but you gotta do six sentences. Right? So, it's kind of—you go on to a flow, which for me is mostly a caffeinated, listening to music on repeat situation where I literally kind of get out of my head. So, I guess I am entering that. But to be honest, it doesn't feel like a deep embodiment. It feels more like I'm surfing on some facts that I got or some pieces I found. Right? And I'm—and I'm trying not to think about it too much and just sort of like go with it. But I guess—I don't know. I guess maybe as a parent, you spend a lot of time deeply enmeshed, right? And deeply—even if you're not like the kids, you are so feeling what is going on with them. You are so in the midst of it with them and in an entanglement with them in a beautiful way.
			And I think that obviously got into the writing. And that obviously got into this piece. Just as before, like helping my dad die. Right? It's such an enmeshed situation. Like you're literally grinding up the medicine and sticking it in the back of their mouth, so they don't choke while they swallow it. Right? Like you are so tied together. So, it's easy—the line between you and the other is blurred.
00:13:01	Jesse	Host	What music do you listen to on repeat and how on repeat are we talking about?
00:13:05	Mike	Guest	So, I really need to—'cause I'm just too much of a rational soul. Right? So, I need to get like on drugs without taking drugs—right?—to write. So, it's all different kinds of things. So, often it's—The National's been one for me. Like 'cause of a song like "Graceless". I'll just like listen to "Graceless" for a day or a week or a month. And—on headphones and on repeat. And it just becomes like a soup—like an emotional soup you're sitting in. Or company? And like The National really became company for me and then I became friends with them. So, that was like double company 'cause you actually know the person.
00:13:39	Jesse	Host	I immediately thought that you were saying that you either listened to The National or the Broadway show <i>Company</i> .
			<i>[Mike laughs.]</i>
00:13:48	Mike	Guest	It was either Stephen Sondheim or The National. <i>[Laughs.]</i> But it—but it's lots of things. And often, it's just like just going from the verse to the chorus. Like, those three seconds will mean everything. And it's like the—it's like—it's a guidepost. It's a

00:14:11	Jesse	Host	lighthouse that I'm aiming towards. Like, it's like—has the—just the right vibe, electricity, emotion, whatever it is that I'm like going for. So, it's—yeah, it's lots of different songs help me do that.
00:14:23	Mike	Guest	What do you think is the relationship between that feeling when you're chasing that feeling when you're writing a feature film and your long career making music videos? Yeah, obviously—or also, I think—you know, so I started off trying to be a professional skateboarder in the '70s. That didn't work out. But skating introduced me to punk, and I was in punk bands when I was... 15? 14? And I'm just a frustrated musician. Or I just—I find music is the higher art. Music is the most magic, most—working on the deepest, most unconscious level and somehow connected to life. Right? To me. So, all my life all my creativity's been somehow around music or trying to emulate what music does. And I think it's been this great, deep frustration in my life that I can't like be. And I hang out with bands so much—right? And my career has been like doing either record covers or music videos or then like having these relationships with bands. So, I'm around them all the time.
00:15:43	Jesse	Host	So, this frustration of not being able to do that, not having that ear and not having that talent, has also been this thing that pushes me forward I guess. And like the other things I've done, the filmmaking or whatever, it's the—that frustration can be like a great incentivizer or just pusher, whatever you—whatever that word is. Just pushes you forward. So, I do feel like I'm trying to emulate the quality of music.
00:15:50	Music	Transition	Even more with Mike Mills after the break. Stay with us. It's <i>Bullseye</i> , from <a href="http://MaximumFun.org">MaximumFun.org</a> and NPR.
00:15:52	Jesse	Host	Relaxed electronic music. Support for NPR comes from Discover with a message about rewards. If you're a loyal credit card customer, you should be rewarded for your loyalty—preferably with something that's useful, like cashback match, for instance. Discover matches all the cashback you've earned at the end of your first year. Finally! Rewards that make sense. Discover: exceptionally common sense. Learn more at <a href="http://Discover.com/match">Discover.com/match</a> . Limitations apply.
00:16:26	Music	Transition	<i>[Music fades out.]</i> Calm, chiming synth.
00:16:31	Jesse	Host	Welcome back to <i>Bullseye</i> . I'm Jesse Thorn. If you're just joining us, my guest is Mike Mills. He's a writer and director who's worked in TV, music videos, and film. His movie, <i>20th Century Women</i> , was nominated for an Oscar for best original screenplay. He has a new film, called <i>C'mon C'mon</i> , which is out now. Let's get back into our conversation.  My wife's family, they're all musicians. None of them professionally and at varying levels of skill, but I remember when I first started dating her when we were teenagers, going to their house and they'd be sitting around like playing a guitar or something. And I remember the feeling of being like, "Wait. You can make art just for your own satisfaction at home by yourself?! It doesn't have to be perfect?!"  <i>[Mike agrees and they laugh.]</i>

			And I wonder if you're able to get there with music. Like—to be like a 70 <sup>th</sup> percentile, you know, <i>[laughing]</i> in the overall human population musician.
00:17:36	Mike	Guest	Yeah, yeah. I don't know what percentile I'm at, but I play music all the time. Like, I play the piano all the time and my kid always goes like, "No offense, but it always sounds the same."
			<i>[They laugh.]</i>
			I'm like, "Wait, wait! I'm playing something completely different!" And I—you know, I was in punk bands all through my teenage years and I play instruments and stuff and it's all alone. It's all at home. And I did this long project with The National and ended up going on tour together. And they're so nice and they're so inclusive. They're like, "Mike, get onstage!"
00:18:12	Jesse	Host	I'm like, "Hell! No!" Like, as much as like that's the dream, I know that that's not me. So. Yeah.
00:18:15	Mike	Guest	I mean, isn't the whole point of punk rock that you don't have to be good at it to be good at it?
00:18:21	Jesse	Host	Well, that's my old punk rock band. The National's not a punk rock band; it's a complicated band. And so, I'm not getting—I'm not playing with those boys.
			Yeah, you're not—you're not composing contemporary classical music on the side.
			<i>[Mike laughs.]</i>
00:18:27	Mike	Guest	Like those dudes.
			Yeah, exactly. Exactly. So, yeah, no. They're like—I remember this, "You could play 'Rylan'. It's just in B." And like, <i>[makes a strangled sound]</i> not happening. Goodbye. Yeah.
00:18:38	Jesse	Host	<i>[Laughs.]</i> But you did—I mean, you made music videos for a long time. And one of the things about making music videos is I'm sure you have to—you know, they're for a song. So, you have to live with that song pretty intensely.
			<i>[Mike confirms.]</i>
			And not only do have to live with that song pretty intensely, but you have to come up with not just an idea, but if I understand the process correctly, a bunch of ideas for what that song could be in a film.
00:19:07	Mike	Guest	Mm. Yeah, or sometimes I do a lot of ideas. I'd often do just one idea. But it's actually—I think that's where I got this thing from, 'cause I would put the song on loop. And because my first ideas would be kind of like obvious and like kind of just like too on the nose, too pointing at what it seems like—
00:19:22	Jesse	Host	In improv, they say "A to B".
00:19:24	Mike	Guest	Okay. And—but like after about a day of listening to it, I start to have really weird ideas that were linked or had a—reverberated with the song, that had an autonomy, too. Right? And that's when it gets really interesting. And often, that's what the band was interested in. Like a cool—like Aar liked ideas like that. So, I think I actually—that's where this whole weird thing of like trancing myself out to music started. But like, also like when I'm on set, either I have

live musicians, or I play music constantly. So, in between—as we’re setting up, as we’re doing things, I’m playing music all the time. It just enchants the set, and it makes it like not a job but a—I don’t know, like an adventure. And it’s crazy how it changes the mood of everyone.

00:20:16	Jesse	Host	So, I’m constantly employing it.
00:20:20	Mike	Guest	When you say live musicians—like a string quartet? Like a—? Like a scene at an art museum in a movie? <i>[Laughs.]</i>
00:20:29	Jesse	Host	<i>[Stammering.]</i> Like a—some—sometimes on a—usually it’s like a French horn or a cello. You know? In the morning. They’ll just be there for like an hour or two in the morning.

You said, “You know?” Like I know.

*[Mike cackles.]*

00:20:35	Mike	Guest	I do not know. I do not know about this French horn, cello section. So, like one guy on a French horn on the corner of the set. And it’s in the morning as you’re getting started and it just kind of trips everyone out. Like, “Wait, is that live music?” And like, yeah. And I have done it on ads where I have a bigger budget where I have had a quartet. And I instructed them every time I say cut to start playing. It was just kind of a lark, and it was really fun, ‘cause it was a really busy day. So, we ended up being like the camera crew and the quartet were in this funny competition with each other. That was more just like a weird thing.
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00:21:35	Jesse	Host	When the crew enters a work site—or the cast—and there’s a cellist playing, and it takes them a beat to figure out where the music’s coming from. Oh, that’s just a guy sitting in the kitchen playing the cello. It’s a delicious sort of pulling the rug out under the workplace thing. And that—as a director, I’m constantly trying to do things like that. Like, that just make it feel like—I think “enchanted” is a good word. It just makes it feel like something unusual, strange, playful, and kind of like surprising it’s gonna go on today.
00:21:38	Mike	Guest	Aren’t some people just like, “I’m trying to do my job, Mike.” Well, they’re not playing while they’re acting. So, no. I think people mostly enjoy it. <i>[Beat.]</i> I don’t know.

*[They laugh.]*

00:22:00	Jesse	Host	The director’s always the last one to know what everyone’s actually thinking. So, maybe everyone hates it. But no, it seems like people really like it or it... it just sort of makes them—I don’t know. It just changes the day.
00:22:11	Mike	Guest	What is a lesson that you learned from making videos that was useful to you as a future filmmaker? I think doing videos—you know, I was kind of chasing Spike Jones and like Michel Gondry and people like that who had done a lot more by the time I got started. And they all had like stories. Or at least like a Rube Goldberg. There was like some kind of causality or some kind of idea going on. And I think that’s—it led me to be a writer/director. ‘Cause it—when you are doing video treatments, it’s like an idea contest where it’s like you and five other directors all competing and you turn in a treatment. So, that idea contest thing—



I don't know, it felt important, or it suited me, or I liked that. I like that way of going.

'Cause I got into film—like I went to art school, didn't go to film school. And the teacher that meant the most to me was a man named Hans Haacke who's like a German conceptual artist. And so, all of us that like liked those classes were all like pretentious Haackeites. That was also another like—you're an idea generator more than you're a worker in any particular medium. So, I kind of always said like my film career actually started in Hans Haacke classes, 'cause it was all about being able to articulate and execute and think around your idea. You know? And understand plan B and C and recover from the failure of an idea. Or find out what's good and bad about it.

00:23:35	Jesse	Host	All that kind of thinking is so director-y. It's so—it's the stuff of directing. So, I felt like that's where I started. I mean, I feel like—like you're talking about two people that went before you, in Michel Gondry and Spike Jones, who also very famously—I mean, they made some amazing music videos. Like, those music videos were—you know, there are music videos from that time when some music videos had budgets that are defined by their like aesthetic qualities. You know.
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*[Mike agrees intermittently as Jesse continues.]*

00:24:30	Mike	Guest	I mean, David Fincher music videos that he directed a bunch of are really intensely aesthetic. I think Spike Jones and Michel Gondry music videos are defined by those kinds of ideas that win idea contests that you described. They're full of amazing ideas and their movies are like that too. They're often about an amazing idea. The transition from that kind of thing to your movies is less clear to the outsider, I think. Yeah, I think I'm less whatever you wanna call it, sort of advanced sci-fi or like interesting sci-fi—which those guys get into more. They'll—you know, also I will say, their things are highly aesthetic, but I find them more dirty or like broad or less like just about being pretty. But it's like deeply visual, deeply about—I don't know, exploring an idea and a vibe through aesthetics. Michel especially. Michel's like such a craftsman of all kinds. Like a scientist. You know?
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00:25:09	Jesse	Host	So, I think they are equally aesthetic, just in a different kind of paradigm of what's good. Can you give me an example of an idea that you had when you were in art school that you really had to work over?
00:25:18	Mike	Guest	Work over. What do you mean?
00:25:20	Jesse	Host	Like, that you really had to—you really had to do a lot of figuring out on, whether it was figuring out what the medium was or that it changed a lot in working on it. And you don't have to be embarrassed if it's something embarrassing.

*[Mike giggles.]*

00:25:35	Mike	Guest	Because you were <i>[chuckles]</i> 20, 21, or whatever. <i>[Playfully.]</i> There's <u>nothing</u> embarrassing in my past. Yeah, yeah.
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00:25:37	Jesse	Host	Don't worry about that. It's a long time ago. It's water under the bridge.
00:25:41	Mike	Guest	Well, that's an interesting question and I haven't been asked that. So, okay, while I was saying that I was a big Hans Haacke student and we did like very conceptual pieces in that class, I also loved to draw. And drawing's how I got into art school. I had a horrible, horrible, horrible high school grade point average. So, the only reason I got into art school is 'cause I could draw. You know? That was like my ticket. And I can remember when you were just asking me that question, I did this long series of drawings that are often about the shape of a house and the idea of home. But it was all about being like a suite or multiple images that were like playing around. And they were like large-scale drawings.
			And so, it's very kind of physical and process-y, kind of like music, really. It's like a flowy thing that's experiential. You don't know where it's going. I think that's music to me, too. Right? And there was a lot of erasing involved. Like, literally that was like a big part of the aesthetic of those pieces was like all the erased lines. You know? And this kind of like layering of greys and then the final black on the top. And they were a lot about what <i>[holding back a chuckle]</i> got erased and that you could see the erasure and then you see sort of like where it ended up. And I—I don't know what I'm talking about right now, but I still—I still like—that memory's nice. That memory is—and it feels somehow akin to what I do.
00:27:04	Jesse	Host	I mean, I feel like, as you describe it, you are describing it—that memory like it is physical to you right now.
00:27:11	Mike	Guest	Uh-huh. A bit. 'Cause it did—
00:27:12	Jesse	Host	Like, I see your body reacting to the—
00:27:16	Mike	Guest	<i>[Cackles.]</i> 'Cause it is very—like your hand will travel three or four feet in either direction. So, it—that does become like a very physical event. And then, yeah, drawing is physical. Right? You are creating lines. And then you're—you're doing it over and over again. That's the other part. So, I don't know. I don't know. That doesn't even—to me—totally relate to the act of filming. It relates kind of to the act of editing, 'cause editing you'll go over scenes sooo many times, sooo many iterations of a scene. Hundreds. Often, once you show it to people and they kind of react, you take notes, go back. And yeah, that does feel like it relates.
			But I don't—that's kind of mysterious even to me why I brought that up or what it has to do with this.
00:28:02	Jesse	Host	<i>[Chuckles.]</i> Can you tell me the steps that you go through writing and where other people enter into the process?
00:28:12	Mike	Guest	So, this one kind of came quicker. Often, they take like 2+ years and it's kind of hellish. You know, the first six months is rad and then the rest is like increasingly difficult. This one came pretty quick and—so, it started to my friend Andrea. Andrea Longacre-White is one of the producers of the film and a great friend of mine and is so positive and knows me and knows my trips and knows my unbearable Eeyore vibes I can have about my own work. Right? And just pushes me out of it. So, I kind of had to okay everything with her. <i>[Laughs.]</i>
			"What if it was like this? What if it had that? What if it was this? What if it was that?" And then I would ride off of her energy for a

while. Then there's a long solo process where you're doing the—for me, it's the music thing. And the music thing is really very much at the beginning when you're trying to like summon it. You're trying to ask for it. And it's very open-ended. And I'm very caffeinated and just sitting there with a notebook and just anything that comes to mind. Like a very trusting just intuition, unconscious stuff. And then going through those notebooks and like transferring them to like Evernote thing. And that becomes like a very long list of things I liked from the notebooks. And then there's another Evernote file which is a first stab at organizing all that stuff I edited. Right?

“Oh, maybe this is kind of an act. Maybe this happens. Maybe this is a sequence of these random things I found.” And then that goes to another Evernote that's like a cut down of that and kind of now looks almost like an outline. But not really; it's like a flowy outline. And then I'll start actually getting into Final Draft. I try to avoid—Final Draft is the software you use to write scripts. I like Final Draft a lot—to everyone at Final Draft.

*[Jesse chuckles.]*

But I hate getting into it, because once you're there then you're stuck in this weird—you're like, concrete-tized and like limited and like you start writing like scripty kind of things. Right? So, I try to like not do that as much as I can. Right? Then after a while of doing that, I go back to the verbal thing. Like maybe bringing Andrea in or any friend I can coerce into the room and go back to just telling it. Right? And that really often brings it back alive again. You know? And then sharing it with lots of people. I'm very into other people—other people's help. 'Cause you lose track. So—and then what responds and what doesn't.

00:30:34     Mike             Guest

And there's a lot of correlation. Like everyone hates this scene. Everyone likes this scene. You know? And you're like, “Okay, cool. I'm beginning to learn what I'm writing, myself.” And then the older I get—this is gonna sound pretentious and woo-woo and all that. I don't think I'm in any control of what I make or what I do. I feel like you summon things, but you summon like whole beings. Like, the film, the script, the cosmos of the film. Yeah, it kind of came from me and my kid and all that, but it's like its own weird entity *[chuckles]* that you kind of ask to come forward.

I think Mr. Fellini would say this too. I'm kind of getting this from him. And it brings problems and plusses to your life and to its own making. And it kind of like asks for people. And there's certain people who are like, “No, I don't want that energy. I don't want that thing.” And there's other people like, “Yeah! I don't even know why.” And so, then it's kind of like learning how to ride that wave or like understand that it's not totally in your control and that it is this kind of like from the cosmos spiritual entity blob that you're sort of helping fertilize and bring forth. And it's part you but it's equally not you. Yeah.

00:31:40     Jesse             Host  
00:31:43     Mike             Guest

And you have all of these actors and—  
Then that's the next phase.

*[Jesse laughs.]*

Yeah. And I love—so, then there's this radical, beautiful, weird exchange—especially if you write material that comes from a very personal space—where you're like, "Okay. My worst nightmare is that this is just like a bad memoir. This has to be a film that's alive for strangers in a dark room, in a theater down the road." Right? And the way that it's alive for them, if it's really alive for the actors. How's it be alive for the actors? Well, you have to get under their skin. Right? You have to pick someone who you feel like it's gonna get under their skin somehow and it has to become alive for them and they have to really be the author of the character. And if I'm doing—if I'm on and they ask me any question, I never answer. [Chuckles.]

I just ask the question back. Right? Like, "What do you think?"

They're like, "How—well, you know, why is he doing this?"

"I don't know, that's weird, isn't it?" [Chuckles.] "Well, I don't know. Why do you think he's doing that?" You know? And then the more you can get them to coauthor—for me, at least. This is my way. The more exciting it is, the more fun it is. And it becomes this like lovely thing of like giving the keys over or this weird exchange of like here's some content, here's some blood, some—what do you call it? Compost. And they enact it, which I could never do. Right? I could never be it. In that way, actors are like musicians to me. You know? It's this thing I can't do. So, I'm like forever enamored, forever their biggest fan. Yeah. So, they—everyone—everyone says like, "Yeah, how personal is this?" Or—and it's a good question. I would ask the same question.

And I always answer like, "Well, my dad is not Christopher Plumber at all." You know? And Christopher made that character. It's Christopher's instincts, blood, brain, soul, history that's making what you see. You know? Christopher got stuff from me and my dad, but it's Christopher. You know? And the same thing like Woody or—I'm so not Joaquin, right? Like, you know me. I'm not Joaquin at all! [Chuckles.] And, uh—but there's this lovely—I don't know what the word is. Like dance that you do with the actor and then giving it to them.

00:33:51	Jesse	Host	We'll finish up with Mike Mills in just a minute. When we come back from the break, <i>C'mon C'mon</i> features real interviews with real kids and they were really conducted by the movie's star, Joaquin Phoenix. We'll talk about how Phoenix prepped for that. It's <i>Bullseye</i> , from <a href="http://MaximumFun.org">MaximumFun.org</a> and NPR.
00:34:08	Music	Transition	Cheerful, brassy music with light vocalizations.
00:34:10	Jesse	Host	Support for this podcast and the following message come from Airbnb.

If you've ever thought about hosting, you might have a few questions. What's it like? Where do I store my stuff? Is hosting worth it? Now, with Ask a Super Host, you can get free one-on-one help from Airbnb's most experienced hosts. Whether you're curious how to get started or just wondering if it's right for you, you can now ask someone who's already hosting. Learn more at [Airbnb.com/askasuperhost](http://Airbnb.com/askasuperhost).

00:34:41	Promo	Clip	<p><i>[Music fades out.]</i></p> <p><b>Music:</b> High energy, bouncy synth.</p> <p><b>Pee-Wee Herman:</b> Helloooo! I'm Pee-Wee Herman! You might know me from TV, but I really wanna be a DJ! It took some convincing, but KCRW finally agreed to give me an hour on the radio to play you some music with my friends! <i>[Giggles.]</i> Anyway, tune in for one hour of the bestest, most funnest time you'll ever have on the <i>Pee-Wee Herman Radio Hour</i>. I am personally inviting you to tune your transistor radio in to hear me. Or go to <a href="http://KCRW.com">KCRW.com</a>. Duh! <i>[Laughs.]</i> It'll be available for the whole week, from November 26<sup>th</sup> to December 3<sup>rd</sup>. So, you can listen to it again and again and again and AGAIN AND AGAIN! <i>[Cackles.]</i></p> <p><b>Speaker:</b> <i>The Pee-Wee Herman Radio Hour</i> was produced by Maximum Fun and can be streamed on <a href="http://KCRW.com">KCRW.com</a> until December 3<sup>rd</sup>.</p>
00:35:40	Jesse	Host	<p><i>[Music fades out.]</i></p> <p>It's <i>Bullseye</i>. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is filmmaker Mike Mills. He's the writer and director of the new movie <i>C'mon C'mon</i>. Let's get back into our conversation.</p> <p>There's one last thing I wanna ask you about, which is: so, as I said, this—this main character, Johnny, is like a radio producer. Sort of <i>This American Life</i>-y type radio producer. And there's a lot of scenes where Johnny is interviewing kids. I presume these are real kids.</p> <p><i>[Mike confirms several times as Jesse continues.]</i></p> <p>Really being interviewed. And you often show this part of the interview where he says—you know, "You can tell me if you don't wanna answer the question or if you're not comfortable asking the question." That's something that... applies in some interview situations. Like, it's something that I may have remembered to say to you before we talked. I'm not sure.</p> <p><i>[They laugh.]</i></p> <p>But certainly, like if I'm interviewing an artist, I'll often—if I know I'm gonna ask something personal or intimate, I'll let them know.</p> <p><i>[He agrees.]</i></p>
00:36:49	Mike	Guest	<p>Why did you choose so often—or multiple times, anyway—to show that?</p> <p>Yeah. Well, so it's an interesting thing to bring up. So, yeah. So, Joaquin's playing someone that's—it's a little bit Studs Terkel. It's a little bit Scott Carrier. It's a little bit <i>This American Life</i>-y world that to me is sort of like an old-school radio person who like doesn't know about podcasts. Or he does, but like he comes from radio. And so, Molly Webster from Radiolab is his partner and she's not an actress. She really is a radio journalist. And she was always my reference point for that character. And then my—Jen Venditti, my casting person in New York—just brought her in. And I didn't even</p>

know she was going to and then I was like, “Wait, that’s Molly Webster! That is Molly Webster! That’s her voice!” You know? And she’s like quite good and natural at being an actor and like really beautiful and like it was this weird thing.

So, the way that Joaquin prepped for that role was just to go around with Molly and do interviews. ‘Cause he really wanted to understand the gear and just the whole thing. And they went—and I would set up people for them to interview and they would go do it on their own. I wasn’t there. And then they would come back, and we would like talk. And I just noticed they started doing that. I think Molly taught Joaquin to do that. And that wasn’t something I wrote or knew was gonna happen. And every single interview, they would do it and they would say it at the beginning. They each would do it. So, I think Molly must have taught Joaquin that.

And to me, it’s—well, it speaks to one of the themes of the movie. It’s like non-coercive, hopefully, relationships are being built. Well, that’s the goal at least. Right? I think coercion does happen by accident all the time. And it’s something—it’s not an easy thing to avoid. And like, real listening has some idea or goal of consent built into it. But it’s all really interesting seeing this on the movie, where Molly, Joaquin, Jaboukie Smith-White, and Sunni Patterson—who is also a non-actor person from New Orleans. They’re all sitting around a table just talking about the interviews, just improvising. And they got into this conversation about consent, and it was just too long to put in the film, and it felt like indulgent, but it was so great. And there was a lot about like—you know, like do these kids ever really give consent?

‘Cause, yes, they signed a paper. Yes, they know. But like, at that age—9 to 14... not everyone has like the agency to really say no. And it’s so easy to keep saying yes. Right? And what is consent? But the whole intention was to create a conversation where you’re not—how little can you guide the conversation? Like how much freedom can you give the person? How much safety can you give the person? That was something that we all talked about a lot. And I do feel like it’s parallel to what Viv’s mothering is like. Right? And so, Johnny’s learning about parenting from Viv. Which is like—has a nonviolent communication aspect to just her way of being in the world. Right?

00:39:39    Jesse            Host

And you’re also capturing stories from all these people in your life, all these people who you’re putting on the screen. And, indeed, one of the people that you’re putting on the screen is a child. So, it must be—*[chuckles]*.

*[Mike affirms.]*

00:39:58    Mike                    Guest

It must be in your mind all the time.  
Yeah. There’s lots of things—so, we interviewed all these real kids who are—I mean, all kids are real, but whatever. They’re non-actors and nothing was scripted and they’re speaking their truth. They’re talking about their lives. And some of the things they said, we didn’t put in because it felt unintentionally coercive. Or it felt unintentionally—what we learn to do, as adults, is to protect ourselves. And kids have this like tremendous willing to be

vulnerable and make themselves vulnerable. And there was lot of discussions between and Jen, my editor, about like what we can include and what we shouldn't include, just leave private. You know?

And that's still a big question. You know? Like we could go back into that film and just re-worry about all that at any moment. With Woody—the kid who plays Jesse—and Woody's mom, Vonda. I feel like those are such intentional people who are so grounded and smart. And Woody has such a deep rudder that while he now—Woody I think just turned 12 recently and they were like 9 to 10 while we were shooting. Woody wants to be an actor. Woody is an actor. You know? That's Woody's love and passion for life. That isn't Woody's life. Right? But it is Woody's work and his heart work. Right? So, it's the job of respecting that. You know, and keep—I don't know—holding onto that in a nice way. But the non-actor kids we invited to be in the film, that's a really heavy responsibility that hopefully we got right enough. Right? I don't—that's just endlessly dicey turf.

00:41:27    Jesse            Host

Woody, the actor who plays the kid, Jesse, in the movie is pretty extraordinary. And one of the things about the performance is its lack of mannering. And that includes not just manner of speech, but like physically in the body.

*[Mike agrees.]*

00:41:55    Mike                    Guest

Was that something *[laughing]* that just came to you whole cloth or was it—?

Yeah, it's a gift from Woody. It's a gift from Woody and I think maybe Woody's mom, Vonda, too. It's—so it's not just manner. It's also like a lot of kids are trained like when you're on camera like don't rub your face. Or you know, appeal to the camera. Point towards the camera. Don't put your—don't pick your nose *[chuckles]*, don't wriggle. Don't do all these things. And so, Woody—when I met him, he came to do like a—whatever. An audition, a test, with Joaquin. But we did some stuff alone and I noticed right away two things that are like magic. One, Woody doesn't care about the camera. Woody does not perform for the camera.

Which, as a kid actor, is gold. It's like—well, for naturalistic acting, it's what I need so much. And it's the thing—it's like when you're trying to buy a house and the kitchen and the bathroom's being remodeled and the house is ruined. It's like that's what's off when you bump into like an actor who's very young who's been kind of trained. They've been trained to appeal to the camera. And somehow, I think Vonda's smart enough to just know like don't to that. Right? And Woody never got through that. And then that—Woody is very wriggly. You know, like any nine-year-old is. There's just a lot of physical energy and, yeah, deliciously, he doesn't stop himself from like scrunching his eyes or putting his hands in his hair and all that. And I definitely encouraged it. And Joaquin's—we're all that way. Right? 'Cause Joaquin's like that too, as an actor.

So, that was really very much encouraged. But then it almost sounds like Woody's sort of a savant or something. Which is really

00:43:32	Jesse	Host	not the case, at all. Like, Woody's doing an accent the whole time. He's British. So, he's doing an American accent the whole time. When I say cut, he goes, <i>[in a cartoonish, Dickensian accent]</i> "Oh, really?" Like he goes right back in his real voice. And I was just looking—I had to do some behind—
00:43:34	Mike	Guest	<i>[Chuckling.]</i> He turns into Oliver from <i>Oliver</i> , apparently?! Yeah, exactly. <i>[Laughs.]</i> He turns into a really bad American doing a British accent.

And then I just had to do all this looking at takes to do this behind-the-scenes stuff and I was reminded of a scene where Jesse learns that his dad is being hospitalized and he cries at this one moment. Woody cried on that line for like eight takes in a row. Like, not on the other lines. Just on that line. So, like that's a detailed, controlled actor like that can summon it like that. So, I had a really neat experience—and maybe I'll end with this. I had a really neat experience where Elle Fanning, my great friend who was in *20th Century Women*, saw the movie just recently. Really enjoyed Woody performance.

00:44:32	Jesse	Host	And we were talking about it, and she said, "You know, I always hated being called a child actor. 'Cause I—it makes me feel like what I was doing was different than what the adults were doing, when I felt like my work was the same as the adult work and I wasn't less than or like some strange animal that just locked into getting it right." And Woody's that, for sure. That's like as crafty and worked on as any of the adult work. Well, Mike, I'm so grateful to you for coming in again and it's so nice to get to talk to you again.
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00:44:36	Mike	Guest	<i>[Music fades in.]</i> Yeah, so fun. It makes me feel like the film happened if I chat with you. It's like, I'm here! <i>[Chuckles.]</i>
00:44:42	Music	Transition	Bright, brassy music.
00:44:45	Jesse	Host	Mike Mills. His new movie, <i>C'mon C'mon</i> , is fantastic. It's playing in theatres right now. Go watch it. If you haven't seen his previous film, <i>20th Century Women</i> from 2016, that is also fantastic. You can stream it on a bunch of different platforms right now.

00:45:01	Music	Transition	<i>[Music fades out.]</i> Thumpy, chiming synth.
00:45:08	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. We were in our office on MacArthur Park in Los Angeles, this week. And all of the dirt in MacArthur Park is covered with something white. We don't know what it is.

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. We get help from Casey O'Brien. Our interstitial music is by Dan Wally, also known as DJW. Our theme song is "Huddle Formation" by the band The Go! Team. Thanks to them and to their label, Memphis Industries, for letting us use that great tune.



You can keep up with our show on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. We post our interviews in all of those places. And I think that's about it. Just remember: all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

00:46:06    Promo            Promo

**Speaker:** *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and is distributed by NPR.

*[Music fades out.]*