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| 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. |
| 00:00:14 | 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. Robin Thede works hard. Incredibly hard. She always has and she probably always will. She was the first ever Black woman to be a head writer on a late-night talk show. That was <i>The Nightly Show</i> with Larry Wilmore. Before that, she was head writer on Queen Latifah’s daytime talk show. Robin is a Second City alum, the former host of the BET show <i>The Rundown</i> , an actor who’s appeared on <i>Key & Peele</i> , <i>Insecure</i> , and <i>Central Park</i> . And if all those credits weren’t enough, Robin also cocreated and stars in the Emmy winning series, <i>A Black Lady Sketch Show</i> , which just wrapped it’s third season on HBO. |
| | | | As the title suggests, <i>A Black Lady Sketch Show</i> is a sketch show created by and starring Black ladies. The show is hilarious. Robin and her team are the best at what they do. But what makes it so unique is its specificity. Thede and her costars cover church politics, family reunion line dancing, and as you’re about to hear in this clip, hair-specific weather forecasts. |
| 00:01:26 | Sound Effect | Transition | Music swells and fades. |
| 00:01:27 | Clip | Clip | Music: Classic, cheerful broadcast music. |
| | | | Forecaster (A Black Lady Sketch Show): Thank you, Cynthia! Well, Tulsa, looks like we have more showers and storms in the forecast for today as a cold front makes its way across the state like a wide-toothed comb on wash day. The rain continues on Tuesday, so I’m not recommending a wash-and-go style just yet. You need to go wash-and-go bundle up with some Malaysian, Brazilian, Peruvian, kinky-straight, kinky-curly—doesn’t matter! Anywhere from 5-8 packs should do it if you wanna get on these IG levels of beauty. You know what I mean? By Wednesday—hump day!—the winds are gonna pick up, and so will your lace front! So, it’s <u>got</u> to be secured! Things clear up on Thursday, but don’t break out the flat iron just yet or I foresee a ton of breakage. |
| | | | As we head into the weekend, the cold front will pass. Temperatures will soar into the 90s, so it’ll be a great time to break out those protective styles. That’s right! It’s looking like box braids for brunch, ladies! For the rest of the weekend, I’m gonna recommend a leave-in conditioner. Or better yet, not leave-in’ your house! |
| 00:02:25 | Sound Effect | Transition | Music swells and fades. |
| 00:02:28 | Jesse | Host | Robin Thede, welcome to <i>Bullseye</i> . I’m happy to have you on the show. |
| 00:02:31 | Robin Thede | Guest | Thank you! Is it weird that I—not singalong, but that I speak along when I hear clips from the show? <i>[Laughs.]</i> |

00:02:38 Jesse Host I love it, number one. Number two, you're in good company. I—the only other like true singalong I've ever had was one of the Pointer Sisters. She just full on sang along with her own song in the studio, and it was the greatest thing that's ever happened in my life.

00:02:51 Robin Guest Yeah! Why not?

00:02:53 Jesse Host Truly.

00:02:54 Robin Guest Why not.

[Jesse agrees.]

00:02:56 Jesse Host Why not.
Robin, I think that sketch speaks to the fact that you—at this point, you and your colleagues are the James Thurbers of haircare humor.

00:03:05 Robin Guest Wooow! Wow. High praise. I have no idea who that is. *[Cackles with delight.]*

00:03:11 Jesse Host You're a Midwesterner. You should know these things!

00:03:14 Robin Guest Should I? Who is it? I don't know!

00:03:16 Jesse Host A humorist. A humorist.

00:03:17 Robin Guest I wanted to just go along with it—ooh! Yes, of course. Yes, of course. Yes, of course.

00:03:22 Jesse Host A legendary humorist.

00:03:24 Robin Guest Shame on me. But yeah, we definitely have leaned into the haircare this season. I think people thought we were gonna do that much more in the first two seasons. We had a little bit of it, but this season we just didn't care. We were like, "We have so many more hair related things to say." But it's not what the whole series is about. But yeah. We don't shy away from it.

00:03:42 Jesse Host *[Chuckles.]* I wouldn't—I wouldn't assert that it was.

[Robin laughs.]

00:03:56 Robin Guest But it does feel like one of those things that, if you have a show called *A Black Lady Sketch Show*, there are cultural points of reference that you might not get to do jokes about elsewhere, because you'd lose too many people.
Oh yeah. *[Laughs.]* Or they would—yeah, they would just be confused. And the great thing about this show is that we just don't care! And you—it's why I purposefully titled it *A Black Lady Sketch Show*. 'Cause I didn't want anyone to be surprised. And I feel like, you know, you're coming along for that ride. And people have told me it's actually been pretty educational! *[Laughs.]*

00:04:19 Jesse Host When you were pitching this show or conceiving of the show, did you think of it first and foremost as a show for Black women? Or did you—were you thinking about how to, for lack of a better word, cross over? How to translate the experience of a group of Black women to people from other cultural categories?

00:04:39 Robin Guest You know what's interesting? People ask me things like this, and I—for me, it's neither. We—when I first created the show, and continuing until now, my only goal has been to celebrate Black women and to break open an area of comedy that was so White male dominated, which is sketch. Right? Like, an article in *The New York Times*—a profile of the show—recently said that in our opening, we had more Black women than any other people had had in the cast of their shows in decades. You know? And so, I think for

me it was about just carving out our own space and being able to create freely from our point of view.

So, it wasn't about only catering to Black women. It also wasn't about bringing in nonblack people into our humor. It was about providing a space for us, as artists, to be able to freely create. And I think that—in a selfish way—ends up actually accomplishing both of those goals without even intending to. Right? Like, I think this show has been able to pull in people who normally wouldn't have found themselves watching something called *A Black Lady Sketch Show*, and it's also been able to make Black women feel seen. So, I think we've been able to accomplish all three.

00:05:49 Jesse Host

What's it like when you're pitching sketch ideas in the room? Do you ever grapple with those questions when you're doing that?

00:05:55 Robin Guest

Oh no. We're so focused on just doing the funniest show possible. Like, I think if we just focus on the comedy, it prevents us from veering off into areas that feel like something that comes from like a fear or a belief about the industry or the audience. I think what we've proven in three seasons is that even though we're called *A Black Lady Sketch Show*, our audience is widely diverse and appreciates it from a variety of perspectives, which I love. Because I think it's bringing that celebration of Black women to the masses. And being able to have them appreciate—you know—the kind of humor that we're doing in a new way.

00:06:38 Jesse Host

Robin, when I met you, you were probably best known as the cohost of the Nickelodeon Kid's Choice Awards streaming preshow.

[Robin confirms with a laugh.]

Now you have more jobs than a human being could possibly imagine.

00:06:54 Robin Host

[Laughs.] It's true.

00:06:55 Jesse Host

You know, you're onscreen for at least much of the show. Maybe most. And you are running the show, and you have a production company and a deal for your production company, as well now.

[Robin confirms.]

When you're in production for the show, like what does that mean practically for your life?

00:07:18 Robin Guest

[Laughs brightly.] Oh—oh! I thought that was a joke! Uuum.

[They laugh.]

Yeah, what life? Um. When we're in production, my friends just know, "Alright. We'll see you next year." *[Laughs.]* Like, yeah. It's like half my year is gone. So, I make the show 11 months and 28 days of the year. People are like, "Why does six episodes of television take so long?" And I'm like, well. Hiring. Writing. Preproduction. Production. Post. Press. And then I'm right back in it the next season. So, I do every step of the process of making the show, because I am the showrunner. And so, for people who don't know what that means, that means I'm the person running the company. I'm running—you know, the whole production, from hiring to delivering it to the world. So, there's no process that I don't touch.

So, for my life, it means that a lot of my friends I've hired on the show. So, I can see them. *[Laughs.]* And the other ones, we make time when we can. One thing I've done for work/life balance though, since the beginning, is tell my crew and my cast that we don't work weekends. So, a lot of time, I spend that recuperating or reading other scripts for my production company or doing press or whatever. Occasionally having recreation. But certainly, the 12 weeks of the year that we're actually filming, it just means my life kind of shuts down and focuses on the show. But because I am in so much of it, you're right. It's important that I'm delivering a great performance, and it's important that I'm not thinking about, "Oh, what are those union things we need to think about for the crew for next week? Or what are the overages in the budget? Or what are the costumes for next week? Are they already at the tailor? Are they here?"

00:09:26 Jesse Host You know, I can't be thinking about that. As soon as action is called, I have to take all of that off and perform. And if I don't do that, then—you know—I am not doing myself or the show just service. So, I think—you know, it goes in waves, but there are definitely parts of the year that are pretty all-encompassing, for sure. One of your first sort of high-powered jobs was working with Larry Wilmore. He was a guest on this show many years ago. Maybe 10+ years ago. And he's obviously one of the funniest dudes. And people who know him as a performer, know that he's one of the funniest dudes from his work on *The Daily Show* or his own show or as a standup comic long ago. Whatever it is.

[Robin agrees.]

00:10:00 Robin Guest But the thing that struck me is I was like, "Aw gosh, I think this might be the smartest person I've ever talked to." *[Laughs.]*
00:10:02 Jesse Host Yeah, he really is. He really is. *[Laughing.]* I was—like I think funny people are often smarter than average, but it's not a requirement.

[Robin confirms with laughter.]

00:10:34 Robin Guest And I was—I was really stunned. And he's the kind of guy who really seems like he has some perspective on the game and knows the levers. So, when you got that job, which—you know, I don't think you even expected to be interviewing for the head writer gig on that show. I think you went in for a staff writer. No, that's what he said in some interview, but that's not true at all!

[Jesse laughs.]

00:10:55 Jesse Host I came in there ready to be head writer, and I had like a—I had a whole binder! I think I told you this years ago, but I had a whole binder that was what I would do as head writer. He said in an interview I was being interviewed as a staff writer; I don't think that's true. I went in fully knowing I was being interviewed—maybe he thought that!
00:11:00 Robin Guest It sounds like—yeah, I mean it sounds like Robin, maybe the issue here *[laughing]*—
Is that I went in cocky? Well, it worked! *[Laughs.]*

00:11:02 Jesse Host He brought you in to interview you as a staff writer. You came in with head writer binders.

00:11:09 Robin Guest Yeah. I sure did! I was like, “Here’s what I would do as your head writer. Here’s the bits I would do. Here’s how I’d run the room. Here’s the writers I would hire.” Yeah! He was like, “Okay!”

00:11:20 Jesse Host What did you have? So, tell me about what you had in the binders when you went to interview for the show?

00:11:24 Robin Guest Okay. So, back then—this was 2014—I was the head writer at Queen Latifah, and I had just left because I knew Larry was about to do a show, and I really wanted to be on it. And I was like, “Okay.” I didn’t wanna do daytime anymore. Queen—working with Queen Latifah was great, but I was kind of just doing that to get my head writer legs under me. And, um, it was a great experience.

00:11:45 Jesse Host This was Queen Latifah’s daytime talk show.

00:11:48 Robin Guest Daytime talk show, yeah, yeah, yeah.

00:11:49 Jesse Host But it had some other stuff. It had some kind of—it had some *Ellen* vibes to it.

00:11:54 Robin Guest It did! We did a lot of sketch, and that was the reason I went. ‘Cause I was like, “I wanna incorporate more sketch, ‘cause I wanna—” I was auditioning for *The Daily Show* and *SNL*. And it was all the things I wanted to do but couldn’t quite crack. So, we were doing a lot of that on that show. And so, I left there in May or June, and by August I think I had the interview, which I thought was for head writer. And so, the show was called *The Minority Report*. I don’t know if you remember this. When they first picked it up, it was called *The Minority Report*. And Fox was doing a reboot of *The Minority Report* movie as a TV series. And so, Fox said, “Cease and desist with that title.” *[Laughing.]*

And Larry said, “I know what it should be called. We should—we’re following *The Daily Show*, let’s call it *The Nightly Show*.” And I was like, genius! So, at the time—when I went into interview, though—it was still called *The Minority Report*. So, I took the poster of *The Minority Report* with Tom Cruise on it and superimposed Larry’s head onto Tom Cruise’s body. *[Laughing.]* And it literally just—it had like desk bits. It had greenscreen bits. It had ideas for correspondence, for writers. And a bunch of those writers, we ended up hiring. Like Jordan Carlos and Holly Walker and all these amazing folks. So, we kind of just used it as the manual to staff up the show. It was amazing.

00:13:16 Jesse Host I mean, that was a time when there was this question which was like, “What is a late-night show with a Black person hosting?”

[Robin agrees.]

That—you know, I mean, sure. To a certain extent, Magic Johnson had answered that question years before.

00:13:31 Robin Guest Well! Arsenio Hall and Chris Rock did pretty good shows.

[Jesse agrees.]

But it had been a minute. You know? There had been many numbers of years that we hadn’t had a Black late-night host who had stayed around for any amount of time. So, yeah. It was a big deal. And remember, John Stewart was still on *The Daily Show* at that time, and Colbert had just left. And we were following in his

00:13:55 Jesse Host footsteps. So. Not in his footsteps, but we were getting his timeslot. You know.
Right, that's what I was about to say. Like, yeah. I mean, you were trying to figure out how to be—in addition to, you know, a brainy, Black guy on TV show, a compliment to *The Daily Show* and a replacement for *Colbert*.

[Robin confirms.]

00:14:13 Robin Guest Which, you know, is a lot of things to be.
[Laughs.] Yeah! And I think in the first season, there was a lot of like confusion with viewers about like, "Well, is this gonna be my new *Colbert*?" But the show obviously had nothing to do with *The Colbert Report*. We were like, "Well, why would we even try to do anything like that? That's been done and done masterfully." So—and then, in our second season, John left, and Trevor came in. And then it was like, "Okay, well what is our lead-in now?" Like what is that show's tone going to be? And there are two Black men, so—you know, we just wanted to make sure that we weren't like repeating each other or—you know—following any sort of similar point of view.

Now, Trevor and Larry have completely different points of view, and I think we did a really nice job distinguishing between the two, but it is interesting. Because our ratings at the time were huge compared to what ratings are now. But they were still, obviously, not good enough for Comedy Central to keep us on after two seasons. And I don't know, I think in hindsight I don't know if that decision would've been made if the powers that be would've looked at the landscape with future eyes. But who would know that? You know. So, I think what was done was done, and everybody is still better off for having done those two amazing seasons.

00:15:29 Jesse Host Stick around! More *Bullseye* around the corner from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

00:15:35 Music Transition Thumpy rock music.

00:15:40 Jesse Host It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is actor, writer, and showrunner Robin Thede.

What did you learn from working with Wilmore on that show? A guy who is, of course, talent, but like probably a writer and showrunner and—you know—creative person first and foremost, even beyond his work as talent.

00:16:03 Robin Guest Absolutely. I learned so much. I mean, I literally just saw him last night. I talk to him all the time. He's amazing! He still advises me. On that show, I think the things I learned back then were that as a head writer, it wasn't my job to make people happy. It was my job to provide a great place to work. And I think that was a big deal for me, because I was very much a people pleaser when I got to *The Nightly Show*. [Chuckles.] And I had spent most of my career—although I was a performer, I was a journeyman performer who was just kind of flitting from one canceled show to the next. And I was also primarily a writer. I wrote for comedians for 12 years before I got to *The Nightly Show*.

So, I was very good at mimicking comedian's styles and being able to write in their voice. But I was not good at writing in my own. And

although I was doing a lot of live sketch, I was still writing characters that were not me. Right? So, he prepared me in so many ways to create my own late-night show and develop my own voice in late night. And then, eventually—once I got canceled—I went back to my roots in sketch, but I went back as a better person, as a better writer, as a better performer, as a better knower of my own voice. You know? And that was because of Larry, for sure. Even on his show, where I was his head writer, he encouraged me to do pieces on camera, and I ended up being a correspondent on like four days of the week, even though I was still head writer.

He encouraged me to find pieces that expressed my opinions about the topics that we were covering. And not only panel, but in comedy sketches. You know? And in pieces, and you know, I did “Black Lady Sign Language”, which was one of the most popular clips from that show. And you know, it’s like—I look at it now and go, “Duh!” It was just like laying the steps to get to *A Black Lady Sketch Show*. So. Yeah! But he really encouraged that and continues to.

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| 00:17:57 | Jesse | Host | What’s something on that show that you figured out about yourself, as a writer and performer rather than as a—you know—supporting figure for others? |
| 00:18:06 | Robin | Guest | That I had something to say. And I learned what my like and dislikes were. And I knew these things, right? My parents are very politically active, and—I guess that’s an understatement. My mother’s in the House of Representatives! <i>[Laughs loudly.]</i> |
| 00:18:18 | Jesse | Host | Yes, your mother is a state rep in Iowa, right? |
| 00:18:21 | Robin | Guest | Is a state rep in Iowa, yeah. But so, yeah. I think for me, I learned just how to communicate my voice. It’s not like I didn’t know my opinions, but I didn’t know how to translate that into entertainment. And so, I learned that through him—and how to make those things valuable and how to make people pay for that. |
| 00:18:41 | Jesse | Host | What’s something that you did on that show or on your show that followed that—your own late-night show—that you were throwing at the wall that failed completely? |
| 00:18:50 | Robin | Guest | Oh! That failed?! |
| | | | <i>[Jesse confirms.]</i> |
| 00:18:54 | Jesse | Host | Oh gosh! |
| 00:18:57 | Robin | Guest | You thought we were gonna talk about your successes, Robin? <i>[Cackles.]</i> The fact that I have to sit here and really think about what failed—uum. Oh! I’ll say, sometimes when I was on panel, I didn’t express myself as eloquently as I wanted to. And so, in the moment, learning to be better about expressing how I felt in a way that was funny but that also wasn’t hurtful. It’s really important for me not to punch down. I don’t think—I mean, no one like came for me and was like, “You hurt me!” But I think sometimes I would watch it back and go, “Ugh, that’s not really what I meant to say.” So, I think it just made me a little more thoughtful about how I communicated ideas, in terms of being able to say something that was like a soundbite but also effective and efficient. |
| 00:19:49 | Jesse | Host | You know, I think there’s too much of this like droning on that I still do, but— <i>[laughs]</i> but I think it helped me with that. Just NPR-style content? |

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| 00:19:52 | Robin | Guest | <p><i>[Laughs.]</i> Here for it. Here for it. Hashtag #TakeYourTimeOnNPR. Yeah, I think that was one of the big things. I think there were a lot of panel nights where I was like, “Ugh, I didn’t say anything great.” You know? So. But that helped me hone my voice. So, once I went to my late-night show and was Robin the host, it made a big difference. My Midwest accent really came out when I said that. Did you hear that?</p> <p><i>[Jesse laughs.]</i></p> <p>I said <i>[using elongated vowels]</i> Robin the <u>hoast</u>.</p> <p><i>[They laugh.]</i></p> |
| 00:20:24 | Jesse | Host | <p>Wow.</p> <p>Let’s hear Robin Thede from her show, <i>The Rundown</i>, which ran on BET in 2017 and 2018. And this is Robin offering a take on a networking event that was making headlines at the time that was called “Come Meet a Black Person”.</p> |
| 00:20:39 | Sound Effect | Transition | Music swells and fades. |
| 00:20:40 | Clip | Clip | <p>Robin Thede (<i>The Rundown</i>): Just when you thought networking couldn’t get any more uncomfortable, somebody in Atlanta made it even worse.</p> <p>Newscaster: The networking event is tackling a thorny issue head on. It’s called “Come Meet a Black Person”, and it’s inviting people to do exactly that.</p> <p><i>[The audience titters.]</i></p> <p>Robin: Come meet a Black person?! Just one? Which one?!</p> <p><i>[The audience laughs.]</i></p> <p>Please don’t let it be Tone Loc. I don’t have anything against him, they just say never meet your heroes.</p> |
| 00:21:02 | Sound Effect | Transition | Music swells and fades. |
| 00:21:03 | Robin | Guest | <i>[Guffaws.]</i> Still a great joke. |
| 00:21:07 | Jesse | Host | I love Tone Loc humor. |
| 00:21:08 | Robin | Guest | I love to bring up people that I think people should not forget about. You know? |
| | | | <i>[Jesse laughs.]</i> |
| 00:21:17 | Jesse | Host | <p>Like, don’t forget about Tone Loc. Please. Anyway, you were talking about <i>The Rundown</i>. Sorry. <i>[Laughs.]</i></p> <p>Yeah, we were talking about <i>The Rundown</i>. So, on <i>The Rundown</i> and on <i>The Wilmore Show</i>, you were performing as yourself. You’ve done sketch all along. And your sketch work isn’t what I would call personality-driven. Right? Like, some sketch performers are doing riffs on themselves.</p> |
| 00:21:37 | Robin | Guest | Oh! Right. No, that’s not me. |
| 00:21:39 | Jesse | Host | You know. There are some sketch performers who have a big persona, and they find ways to twist it 20% here and there and |

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| | | | change the wig. And you are a very transformative sketch performer. |
| 00:21:54 | Robin | Guest | Thank you. That is my goal. |
| 00:21:56 | Jesse | Host | Why is that—why is that your goal? |
| 00:21:59 | Robin | Guest | For me, I think the magic of sketch is being able to completely become someone else and make people believe that. I want people to say, “Where did you go?” I think one of the sketches that people [<i>chuckles</i>] site a lot—there’s a lot, but the 227 reboot we did where I did an impression of Jackée—people are always like, “How? I thought that was her and that you guys had just CGI’ed her face to make her look like that period.” But yeah, I think for me, it stems from growing up and wanting to kind of disappear. You know, being super poor and bullied and all of that stuff. And I know that sketch helped me disappear. I could become someone else and become someone I wasn’t confident enough at the time to be. |
| | | | I grew up with a stutter. I didn’t—kind of went in and out of having friends until I went to like junior high and high school. Then I became more popular. But in my younger days, when I started mimicking and doing impressions and creating them in single-digits age, I probably was looking for an escape. And I think now I just find that a fun place to play. And I don’t find myself nearly as interesting as I find the characters I play. [<i>Laughs.</i>] I think I have a relationship with them, and I develop one and I looove getting lost in them. I mean, there’s no freer time for me than between action and cut when I’m playing a character that is so far from me. Everything goes away in my brain. Like, the stress of the day, the show, my life, whatever, is gone. |
| | | | And I think that’s really magical. I mean, imagine I think for people if you could become someone else. It’s the concept of <i>Severance</i> , right? In a way! [<i>Laughing.</i>] It’s like if you could become someone else or not have a memory of a period in the day, so that you kind of release that anxiety that we all carry with us at a low- or high-grade level—it’s magic! So, for me, that’s what these characters are! I get to really disappear and turn everything off for those few minutes when I’m playing them. Well, “a few minutes”. 12 hours. [<i>Laughs.</i>] But yeah! It’s really magical. I mean, not to get weird about it, but like that’s what it does for me. |
| 00:24:25 | Jesse | Host | I have to say that when you describe the circumstances that led you to want to transform as a kid—and you mentioned your stutter, which I didn’t know about, and you know, poverty. I think my expectation was to hear you say that transformation was built into your life as a—first of all as a multiracial person and second of all as a Black person in Iowa. A multiracial person anywhere, I think, and certainly to some extent any Black person in America. But those things are sort of like—they leave some amount of transformation required for getting by, day to day. |
| 00:25:14 | Robin | Guest | Yeah. You know what’s interesting? My parents—my mom is Black, from Chicago. My dad is White, from a farm of German immigrants in Iowa. And they met in college. And my dad said, “That woman with the afro will be my wife.” And they have been married 50—two years short of 50 years. Still best friends. And I think the thing that they did so well with me, and my sister is they said, “Look... yes, you have a Black parent, and you have a White parent. But the world will see you as Black. You are Black. And you will walk |

through this world as a Black woman. And we will do everything we can to prepare you for that life.”

And so, there was no confusion. I know some people are kind of like, “Weeell, I’m mixed or I’m biracial.” Like, I don’t say I’m biracial. I just say I’m Black. That’s who I am. You know? And no shade to like my White family members. It’s just that they don’t look at me as—like, I don’t believe that White people look at biracial as biracial. I think they just look at them as Black. You know what I mean? Like, I don’t know. But—and who knows? I don’t know. I can’t speak for all White people. But I just feel like, for me, there was never any confusion about who I was. There was never—I understand the concept of code switching, but I never really did it. Because I wasn’t taught to really do that.

I think it was important for me to succeed academically, but not at the cost of who I was. And my parents were just really like—you know, I have people in my family that were Black Panthers in the ’70s. Like, we just didn’t really have that sort of mentality. So, I think for me, I was always very clear on who I was. And the times when I didn’t like who I was when I was in elementary school, it was because I didn’t really like the people I was around. And I was not treated well by them. And it was tough. It was tough. We were one of only a few Black kids in that school, and I dealt with a lot of crap. And so, for me, it only dug deeper into I guess who I was, but—so, I wasn’t trying to escape who I was. I was just trying to escape the stress of the environment. And so, I think that was more of that.

But I was always pretty comfortable in who I was. And I knew that the bullies were stupid. And I knew that they were wrong. Like, I was like, “I’m great!” Like, I just couldn’t understand why they were so mean to me. And I didn’t really equate it with racism as a six-year-old, but you know, learned that later. Also, I just had a family that supported everything. So, for me it just became about play time and the escapism was, yes, to get away from bullies mentally, but it was also fun! I just also found it really, really, really fun. So, yeah, I think that was more of it. But who knows? I mean, it may have informed it on some subconscious level. But for the most part, I didn’t really have any issues with that. And there’s more Black people where I grew up than you would probably think, but I had to get to a different school. *[Laughs.]* And move to a different neighborhood before I met them. For sure.

00:28:20 Jesse Host
00:28:23 Robin Guest

Can I ask you what kind of crap you had to deal with?

Yeah. I mean, you know, I remember playing with a girl in third grade, and went over to her house, and she had two dolls, and she didn’t want me to play with either of them. And I was like, “Why did you invite me over here?” And so, she kept pulling the dolls away from me and was just like being bratty. And she said, “Give me that doll! Give me that doll! Give me that doll, you sambo.” And I was like what? And then she called me the N word, too. The N word, I knew. And I knew that was bad, so I left. And I walked all the way home. I tried to call my mom, but she was—I think she was working a second job. So, no one was home.

So, I always had a key. So, I just walked home, and it was far. And I was eight. And I got home, and then my parents got home, and I

told them what happened. And they obviously had a very detailed conversation with her parents. But—it was just like stuff like that. Like there was definitely a lot of racism, but then there was also people that just picked on me. I was little. I had a stutter well into elementary school. And they'd make fun of the way I talked. You know, that kind of stuff. So, I think for me, it was just typical bully *[censored]* that Black kids in a very White environment go through. And then, when I got to junior high, my junior high was like 50% Black, which was great. My high school was like—I don't know—30% Black.

But by then, I had already found my people, my community. And it was a more balanced approach. And the White people weren't as racist as they were in elementary school? Look, I lived in a like trailer trash area. And like that trailer park fed the school. You know. So, I'm not saying that all people that live in trailers are trash, but those people were. For sure. Like, we had a dude that was like murdered on our steps. You know? It was like we just saw a lot of bad things! You know? There were meth heads and prostitutes and, you know, there was a lot of bad stuff going on around us. So, I think—out of that—it makes sense why I wanted to escape that environment. You know? Not only physically, but mentally in kind of creating some of these characters.

At least, that's what I've discovered in therapy. *[Guffaws.]* You know? But it makes sense, right? I could've done something way worse with my life!

00:30:37 Jesse Host

Even more to get into with Robin Thede after the break. Stick around. It's *Bullseye*, from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

00:30:45 Promo Clip

Music: Sophisticated harpsichord.

Travis McElroy: *[In a cartoonishly hoity-toity accent.]* Hellooo! I'm a stuffy dowager countess!

Teresa McElroy: Travis?

Travis: I'm judging everybody's manners!

Teresa: Oh no.

Travis: *[Speaking normally.]* *Shmanners* isn't judgy. It's about teaching you to be your best self and be a little more confident when you enter social situations that you don't understand, and maybe also teach you a little bit about history you didn't know or give you interesting things to talk about at parties.

Teresa: Yeah, like the secret life of Emily Post.

Travis: Ooor like why wristwatches are the way that they are.

Teresa: We can talk about table manners from the Victorian era.

Travis: Sure! Or what it's like to attend a regency ball.

Teresa: Yeah!

Travis: You can find all that and more if you listen to *Shmanners* on Maximum Fun or wherever your podcasts come from, I guess!

Teresa: Manners-shmanners. Get it?

| | | | |
|----------|-------|------------|---|
| 00:31:30 | Music | Transition | <i>[Music ends in a playful chord.]</i> |
| 00:31:34 | Jesse | Host | Thumpy synth with light vocalizations. It's <i>Bullseye</i> . I'm Jesse Thorn. If you're just joining us, my guest is Robin Thede. Robin is a writer and actor. She was the head writer for Larry Wilmore's <i>The Nightly Show</i> . She was the host of the BET program <i>The Rundown with Robin Thede</i> . These days, she is the creator and star of the terrific comedy series <i>A Black Lady Sketch Show</i> . You can stream all three seasons of it right now, on HBO. |
| | | | As a person with half a family that's White who—you know—lives as a Black person in America, do you feel like you know White secrets? |
| | | | <i>[Robin absolutely loses it.]</i> |
| 00:32:11 | Robin | Guest | That other Black people might not know? You know what?! What a great question. <i>[Beat.]</i> Yes. Yes, I do. <i>[Laughs.]</i> Yeah! I think that I've been—okay, so some of them aren't massive secrets, but like I've seen some culinary choices that are quite interesting. |
| | | | <i>[Jesse "mm-hm"s with a chuckle.]</i> |
| 00:32:32 | Jesse | Host | But yeah! Just in the way that— |
| 00:32:35 | Robin | Guest | Those may just be lowan culinary secrets. <i>[Laughs.]</i> |
| 00:32:37 | Jesse | Host | Oh, for sure! For sure. Definitely, no question. |
| 00:32:41 | Robin | Guest | Do they involve corn? <i>[Laughs.]</i> And many other things. But yeah, I think there are some cultural traditions that are different, but also like conversations. Like, especially when they don't know you're listening or in the other room. For sure! That happened and I'm like, "Oh! That's how they talk about us when we're not here." You know? And again, that's not all White people, but like yeah! Sure! I definitely think I've been privy to some things that, you know, other folks may not have. But I think—you know what, to be truthful, every Black person in this country I always say is in a White emersion program from the time they grow up. Because we are! Right? <i>[Laughing.]</i> Like, we're inundated with White culture, especially growing up in the '80s and '90s. |
| | | | Like, I definitely—and it wasn't a function of Iowa. There weren't a lot of Black people on television or in movies! It was like Eddie Murphy and Whoopi Goldberg and that was pretty much it. You know? I mean, that wasn't <u>it</u> . But you know what I'm saying. Like, it was a much Whiter world and a much more heteronormative, cis, White male dominated world than it is now. So, yeah. But that does make me wonder where are those secrets going if we're in this sort of like very diverse world where people like embrace differences. Like, where are those secrets going now? <i>[Laughs.]</i> Like, are they just being kept closer to the vest? I don't know. |

| | | | |
|----------|-------|-------|---|
| 00:34:02 | Jesse | Host | I wanna ask you about a sort of inside baseball character that's one of your recurring characters on the show. It's a parody of a corner of African American culture that I think a lot of White people don't know that much about. The character's name is Dr. Hadassah Olayinka Ali-Youngman. |
| 00:34:21 | Robin | Guest | Pre-PhD. Very good. |
| 00:34:22 | Jesse | Host | Pre-PhD. <i>[Laughs.]</i> |
| 00:34:23 | Robin | Guest | Mm-hm. You gotta put her—gotta put her title in there! <i>[Laughs.]</i> |
| 00:34:26 | Jesse | Host | She's also pre-Pulitzer. |
| 00:34:28 | Robin | Guest | Yes, she is. Thank you very much. |
| 00:34:30 | Jesse | Host | She is a female riff on this cultural category called a hotep—known as a hotep. |

[Robin confirms.]

| | | | |
|----------|-------|-------|---|
| 00:34:42 | Robin | Guest | For people in our audience who don't know what that is...? My explanation will not help. <i>[Cackles.]</i> A hotep is—it's a silly name for someone, usually a man, who—well, because we've coined the term hertep. So, a hotep is a man who believes that women should be seen and not heard, shouldn't really have as much to do with finances or anything outside of raising kids. You know, there's different ways you can be a hotep. Some of them are very like—and I'm talking in the extreme sense. I'm not—I'm talking like the really ridiculous. I'm not talking about like Black Nationalists, or Black people who are just like down for the cause. Like, I'm talking about the people who are like—you know, some people say that they're like demeaning to women, that they don't believe in traditional education. So, a lot of them like found their own schools, and the knowledge is kind of all BS. And... |
|----------|-------|-------|---|

But it's rooted in this really pure intent to build up the Black community. And there are many people that are called hoteps who I don't believe are hoteps. They're just like really like—you know—down for the cause, militant Black people. Which that is not who I'm making fun of. I'm making fun of the like off their rocker people who are like—you know—spouting all sorts of conspiracy theories about 5G giving us covid or whatever. You know? And so, this character— Dr. Hadassah Olayinka Ali-Youngman, Pre-PhD—is the female version of that. She's a hertep, so-called, as we have named her. And she is—always has lots of conspiracies, you know? She thinks that everything—that bacon is being—the swine industry is funding the destabilization of the Black community, that basically they want us to love bacon so that we somehow fall apart as a community? *[Laughing.]* I don't know!

So, it's like things like that. Like, the really ridiculous conspiracy theories. And then some of them, we try to root—it's like for every crazy four jokes, we try to root some of them in real info! Like, she says this year in the career day sketch that UPN was systemically, you know, dismantled after they made their money off of Black shows. Which a lot of us know to be true! *[Laughs.]* You know? So, it's like—what I try to do is like even when she's saying something that has a ring of truth to it, it still sounds ridiculous. But I want people to go, "Wait a minute! Some of that wasn't terribly crazy." 'Cause I want them—it's kind of gaslighting the audience, honestly

a little bit. But I want them to not write her off totally, because I know people like her, and I love them!

Like, this really is a tribute! Like, people are like, “Oh, you’re coming for hotepts!” And plenty of self-proclaimed hotepts definitely needed to get blocked by me on social media, because they said horrible things to me and have over the years, but that’s okay. But I’m like, “Well, it obviously rang true.” You know? If you were offended.

[Laughs.] But I try not to punch down. Like, this woman really is a love letter to some people in my life who I know and who really make me laugh. So, you know, she’s fun! She’s fun to play. And my hope is that we’re laughing with her as much as we are at her. But I don’t know. People get different joy out of her for different reasons.

00:37:59 Jesse Host

Let’s hear a little bit of my guest, Robin Thede, on *A Black Lady Sketch Show* performing as Dr. Hadassah Olayinka Ali-Youngman.

00:38:07 Sound Effect Transition

Music swells and fades.

00:38:08 Clip Clip

Music: Bright, upbeat music.

Dr. Hadassah Olayinka Ali-Youngman: That’s right! It’s me! Dr. Hadassah Olayinka Ali-Youngman. Google me! Then throw your smartphone in the trash. It’s making you stupid! *[Makes a record skip sound.]* 5G was created to infiltrate our brains with the devil’s propaganda! TikTok! Tick-tock, you’re wasting your fertile years on the Gram! The only 5Gs I recognize is *Da 5 Bloods*. Five triumphant Black men going back to steal the oppressor’s gold from Asia! Meanwhile, in this country, the only way five Black men can gather is if they’re playing basketball! I reject “versus”. Why would I ever celebrate our Black icons battling each other? News flash! It’s us versus them!

00:38:47 Sound Effect Transition

Music swells and fades.

00:38:48 Jesse Host

I mean, it’s one of those things where, uh, *[chuckles]* you know, you mentioned gaslighting. Like, given that the entire cultural apparatus of The United States and much of the world, and the historical and educational apparatuses of The United States and much of the world have been based on White people gaslighting people of color. Like—

00:39:14 Robin Guest

[Chuckling.] Yeah. Or just murdering them. But yes. *[Laughs.]*

00:39:19 Jesse Host

Yeah, very fair. Very fair. But you know, like that ambivalence that you describe, that sort of like fondness and a little bit of side-eye at the wackiness like reflects that when you have to create your whole, own thing—you know. It’s hard! And you know, COINTELPRO was real! You know what I mean?!

[Robin agrees with a laugh.]

Like, at the end of the day, it’s like—I went to see Dick Gregory speak when I was in high school.

00:39:51 Robin Guest

Ugh, amazing.

00:39:52 Jesse Host

And it was amazing, and he was sooo funny and so—it was so much more than I hoped it would be. He also at one point described how the CIA had disappeared—I think it was 20,000 people during the Watts Riots. Like, literally made them disappear.

[Robin confirms.]

And I was like okay! Well, I'm not following you down that one, but—

[They chuckle.]

00:40:13 Robin Guest
00:40:16 Jesse Host

I don't know! Have you done the research? *[Laughs.]*
But like, I also know that—you know—my father, who was a veteran's peace activist, was a target of like—there's—he has an FBI file. You know what I mean?

[Robin confirms.]

00:40:41 Robin Guest

Like, his phones were tapped. And so, there's this certain amount of you just wanna be like, "I don't know if—you know, maybe Erykah Badu thinks some numbers are more magical than other numbers, but that's fine! I love her!" *[Laughs.]* Like—
Listen, I think there's a ring of truth to a lot of things that seem ridiculous. And then there's a lot of ridiculous things that are just ridiculous. But I think the fun in exploring that—especially in this character—is that it goes back to what I was talking about before. It's relatable. Because we all know people. Like you said! Like, who have done and said things that were like, "That's crazy! Wait a minute, though." You know? And I think it's up for us to parse that information about what we believe and what we don't. But I think constantly questioning is something that is really fun to explore in a comedic way. And you know, it's—people—it's arguably the most popular character on the show, so I've been told.

00:41:30 Jesse Host

And so, I think that there's obviously some truth there to people who feel like they know this person.

00:41:35 Robin Guest
00:41:39 Jesse Host

It's very popular to me. I don't know if you can see through our video conference, but I'm wearing my swap-meet beads in tribute.

Oh! Honestly? They're beautiful. *[Laughs.]*

Thank you. I think the fact that you are a woman, and you are performing this character as a woman gives you an opportunity to engage in a pretty tricky cross critique of the misogyny imbedded in some of these ideologies. Like, some of the Jordan Peterson-ness of some of these ideologies that can only come in a context where you are sort of protected enough by the composition of the show and the cast and so on and so forth that you can combine that with your fondness and not feel like you're having to get in a fight with yourself.

00:42:23 Robin Guest

Yeah. I think at the end of the day, I'm not—she's not spouting a true political platform. This is for comedy. Right? *[Laughing.]* So—you know, it's—

00:42:31 Jesse Host
00:42:34 Robin Guest

No, it's very silly. Like, we should emphasize how silly it is.

It's sssuper silly! You know? And like, I definitely am not trying to come for any one person or any group of people. Like, she just makes me laugh and I think—you know, people have drawn comparisons to the Oswald Bates character and the prison kind of theologian or philosopher that Damon Wayans played on *In Living Color*. I love that comparison, 'cause I do think that they're—they live in the same world, on the same plane. You know? And I think that that's fun! And I think that—why can't we do that? I try really hard to poke fun in a way that's gonna make people feel good at the

end of the day. I really am not trying to like bash anybody or take anybody down.

But at the same time, I need to be able to play characters that are—that we know and that we see in the neighborhood. So, that—to me—is what Dr. Hadassah represents. But it’s also why I don’t make her 100% wrong all the time. Maybe the way she delivers is off-putting. *[Giggles.]* But if you think about it—and people tweet this all the time, they’re like, “But was she wrong about that one thing, though?” *[Laughing.]* You know? So. At one point, in the herterp masterclass in season one, she says, *[emphatically]* “Jesus only ate his grandma’s mac and cheese, and so do I!”

[Jesse laughs.]

You know. And that’s just like—it has nothing to do with religion, misogyny, any of those things. But it is a very commonly held Black belief that we do not eat mac and cheese from people that are not either blood related to us or that we know incredibly well. So, you know, it’s like she can be the mouthpiece for things that are just sooo... ridiculous, but also that thread of relatability. You know? And she gets to say it, ‘cause she can say anything. You know? It’s fun. *[Laughs.]*

00:44:13 Jesse Host Well, Robin Thede, thank you. It’s nice to get to talk to you, pal. And I hope I’ll see you again soon.

00:44:18 Robin Guest It’s so good to see you. I’m so proud of you. And you know what? The moustache is thriving.

[Jesse thanks her with a laugh.]

00:44:25 Jesse Host I just wanna say that for the listeners. It’s really thriving. You’re thriving overall, like career-wise, but my moustache is doing very well.

00:44:30 Robin Guest Listen, since the pandemic, my moustache is thriving too. Trust me. *[Laughs.]*

00:44:33 Jesse Host *[Cheering.]* Eeey! Heeeeeeey!

Robin Thede. A legend. You can watch all three seasons of *A Black Lady Sketch Show* right now, on HBO Max. And you should. It’s hilarious. Also, great news: it just got picked up for a fourth season. Look for that sometime next year.

00:44:52 Music Transition Jazzy synth with a steady beat.

00:44:55 Jesse Host That’s the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye* is created from the homes me and the staff of Maximum Fun, in and around greater Los Angeles, California. Here at my house, I’ve been unboxing my late aunt’s record collection. I inherited them from her, and they were shipped to me by Amtrak from Washington D.C., where she lived. Here’s one that I recommend pretty unequivocally: it’s the self-titled debut album by Merry Clayton. M-E-R-R-Y, Merry Clayton. Incredible, slightly rock-tinged soul album from the early 1970s. Listen to it on your streaming service!

The show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producers are Jesus Ambrosio and Richard Robey. Our production fellow at Maximum Fun is Tabatha Myers. We get booking help from Mara Davis. Our

interstitial music is by Dan Wally, also known as DJW. Our theme music is by The Go! Team. It's called "Huddle Formation". Our thanks to The Go! Team for sharing it with us, along with their label, Memphis Industries.

Bullseye is on YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook. So, connect with us in those places. We share all our interviews in all of those. And I think that's about it. Just remember: all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

00:46:10 Promo Promo

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

[Music fades out.]