

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.
00:00:13	Music	Transition	<i>[Music fades out.]</i> “Huddle Formation” from the album <i>Thunder, Lightning, Strike</i> by The Go! Team. A fast, upbeat, peppy song. Music plays as Jesse speaks, then fades out.
00:00:21	Jesse Thorn	Host	It’s <i>Bullseye</i> . I’m Jesse Thorn. Hua Hsu, my next guest, is a writer. His work covers a lot of ground; he’s written profiles and reviews in <i>The New Yorker</i> , covering artists and performers like Bjork, Bell Hooks, and Sandra Oh. He’s also a professor of English with a passion for elevating underappreciated talent in literature. He wrote his first book, <i>A Floating Chinaman</i> , about the writer H. T. Tsiang. Tsiang was an undocumented immigrant from China who self-published his books, initially—handing out copies around Manhattan.
			Lately, Hua has been writing more reflective work. His new book, <i>Stay True</i> , is a memoir. In <i>Stay True</i> , Hsu looks back on his early 20s when he was an undergrad at the University of California Berkeley. His mom was maybe an hour or so away by car. His dad was overseas in Taiwan, working as an engineer. In the dorms, he made and lost friends. He writes about road trips with buddies. He shares correspondence with his father. It’s a book about his most intimate relationships and their interrelationship with his Americanness. It’s also a sort of tragic love story. We’ll get into all of that in our conversation. For now, I just wanna say <i>Stay True</i> is a really special book. It’s beautifully written, casually incisive, and spectacularly moving.
			<i>[Music fades in.]</i>
			I’m really grateful that I got to talk to Hua Hsu about it. So, let’s get into it.
00:01:54	Music	Transition	Dreamy synth.
00:01:59	Jesse	Host	Hua Hsu, welcome to <i>Bullseye</i> . It’s so nice to get to talk to you.
00:02:03	Hua Hsu	Guest	It’s awesome to be here.
00:02:05	Jesse	Host	I was really excited. Look, we’re gonna talk about real things in a moment. But I was just really excited to learn that you grew up a San Francisco Giants fan.
00:02:13	Hua	Guest	Oh yeah, definitely.
00:02:15	Jesse	Host	<i>[Chuckles.]</i> That’s the information—were you like a Joel Youngblood guy?
00:02:20	Hua	Guest	I did like Joel Youngblood. I think Mike Krukow was one of my first favorite giants. I think—it was 1986 was when I started following them. So, you know, Will Clark, Chris Speier, Chris Brown.
00:02:35	Jesse	Host	These are classics. Candy Maldonado.
00:02:38	Hua	Guest	I still think about Mike Aldrete never wore the batting gloves.
00:02:45	Jesse	Host	<i>[Chuckles.]</i> It seems like, from your book, that you’re a pretty serious baseball fan or at least were. What did baseball mean to you?
00:02:53	Hua	Guest	That’s a interesting question. Yeah, I was—I really got into baseball, but much like me getting into music, I think it was more that I got this device and I needed to use the device to do something with, if

that makes sense. Like, but I still remember my parents circa 1986 bought a television, and they were given a free AM portable radio. And I inherited that. And I started listening to KNBR, which was the Giants' flagship station. 'Cause it was like one of the only stations this AM radio could get. And I just became obsessed with carrying this radio around, listening to it during dinner or taking it on road trips, listening to it on the way to school. And so, I just obsessively listened to KNBR, which I think in the mid-1980s, a lot of those AM stations were still talk oriented, but it was like pretty local.

And I just happened to start listening to Giants games, and it just became—I don't think I was really drawn to baseball. I just kind of accidentally started obsessively listening to baseball games on the radio, and then I got into it that way.

00:03:58 Jesse Host

I think a lot about a guy who used to call in to KNBR in—I guess it would've been the early '90s. He would call in to Gary Radnich's show, sort of legendary Bay Area sportscaster. And his name was Johnny the Gout Man. And the thing that I remember most vividly is that one day, during a commercial break, Gary Radnich looked up what exactly gout was and came back on the air just really worried about Johnny the Gout Man.

*[They laugh.]*

It is a very like—as someone who also grew up obsessively listening to that very same radio station and especially baseball games—it's a very easy world to get lost in.

*[Hua agrees.]*

00:04:57 Hua Guest

I can understand you mean by using it as a tool. Yeah. I think that—I think I was just really into listening to the radio when I was younger. Like, I was an only child. I loved kind of curating the world around me. I was the type of kid who had posters on top of my other posters. And just—my room was just filled with stuff, and everything just was this sensory trigger. And you know, I just love the world of the radio, and I just love this idea that there is this new technical language to master, listening to baseball. People just wielded their opinions with an authority that I didn't really feel in my own life. It was just really cool. I mean, I still love listening to sports talk.

But similarly, you know, I didn't get into music necessarily because I love music. What happened was like I got a bumper sticker for a local radio station, and I put it on my binder, and I thought, "Well, I guess I have to start listening to this radio station now that I've—you know—gone through the trouble of putting this on my binder and asking for people to basically ask me if I actually listen to this radio station.

00:05:59 Jesse Host

00:06:02 Hua Guest

What are we talking about? Live 105, the rock of the '90s? It was—it quickly became Live 105, but initially it was KSJO, 92.3, which was the—I don't know if it was San Jose, but it was south Bay hard rock. So, it was kind of like Guns & Roses, Metallica, that kind of stuff. But it was just a bumper sticker I saw around a lot, and one day I found one, put it on my binder, and I was like, "Well, I guess I should start actually listening to music now. 'Cause my dad

was into music, but as a result of him being into music, I thought music was kind of uncool and something only adults were into.

00:06:46 Jesse Host So, KSJO, KMEL, Live 105, like that's sort of—that became the next thing after listening obsessively to baseball games. I'm really interested in the way that your dad talks about music as he writes to you, which you reproduce in the book, and the way you talk about your dad's relationship to music. He was a first-generation immigrant from Taiwan, and there's like this little moment in the book where you talk about what listening to Bob Dylan must have meant to him, as a guy who—when he started listening to it—probably couldn't really understand the lyrics. What did you think about your dad's taste in music when you were a kid?

00:07:25 Hua Guest When I was a kid, I thought nothing of my dad's taste in music, 'cause I think when you're young, you either like idolize your parents or you kind of ignore them. And I mean, I looked up to my parents, but I didn't—I wasn't particularly interested in their interests. And so, the fact that my dad always wanted to—you know—go to Tower Records after dinner, I didn't think it was a particularly like interesting way to spend your time. I would rather just stay at home and listen to Giants games on the radio. But eventually, I think when I got into music—when I realized that there is this kind of social currency to being this middle school kid who had CDs or who had access to new sounds, I thought a lot more about like why they liked the things they liked. And you know, maybe even projected what I thought they saw in these artists.

So, my dad was really into Bob Dylan, Neil Young, Aretha Franklin. Like, he was just sort of a typical person coming of age in the 1950s, 1960s, and '70s. When he got to the United States in the early '70s, he was pretty much just into classical music. Like, I think he'd heard—you know—Elvis, the Beatles, stuff like that. And it was while he was living in this boarding house I think in Amherst, Massachusetts, another person in the boarding house—like, I think like a young, hippie guy—was just constantly blasting Dylan. And initially, my dad thought it was the worst thing he'd ever heard. And eventually, he just grew really accustomed to Dylan's voice, and he ordered—he was part of the Columbia Music Club, you know, like that thing that I was a part of many years later, where you pay a penny and then you get fleeced buying a few things in order to like get a bunch of other things for a penny.

And he started ordering Dylan records and Janice Joplin records and, you know, he eventually got into the full-on kind of rock counterculture.

00:09:23 Jesse Host You know, my parents are probably about the same age as your parents. And you know, my dad used to tell me stories about hiding under his blankets or hiding out in the basement so he could listen to Ray Charles without his parents hitting him. Or, you know, my mom used to tell me stories about going to the RFK stadium in Washington DC to see the Mothership with her friend Claudia.

*[Hua "wow"s.]*

And like, I wondered as I read about your dad's passion for this—you know, for a lot of this same music. I mean like, we're talking

about great music, also kind of classic boomer dad music. And I thought like, gosh, he landed in that same place in such a different way [*chuckling*] from my parents' sort of like—you know—*American Graffiti* or whatever version of that. Were you aware of that when you were a kid or a teenager?

00:10:25 Hua Guest

Probably not. I mean, I think as a teenager, I was not thinking deeply about any of this stuff. But I think, you know, when I got a little bit older—like maybe when I got to college and I thought about—and I started basically taking my dad's records and absorbing them into my record collection, you know, I would think about what these sounds might have represented for him. You know, there are things that he liked listening to. Like, one of his favorite songs is Animals' "House of the Rising Sun". I mean, that's a song about like sin in this very—it's like aggressively about sin. But I don't think he necessarily hears it that way or thinks about it that way. Like, I don't think he was mining music for lyrical lessons for how to be. But I think these songs, these sounds, these poses did—I don't know, I think they taught him something about being American. You know? Or being someone in the west.

He wasn't—he was basically by himself in the United States. Eventually, his brothers and sisters moved here. Eventually, he and my mom got married. But I think for a lot of those first-generation immigrants, you know, you're sort of adrift. You're sort of on your own. And so, you know, he wouldn't have had that experience of having to deal with what other people in his family thought about his interests. Because his interests comprise like such a huge part of who he was becoming. You know? And who he could become.

00:11:58 Jesse Host  
00:12:03 Hua Guest

How old were you when your dad moved back to Taiwan for work? It was—I remember it in part because the 1989 world series was one of [*chuckles*]*—*was when the Loma Prieta earthquake. And I remember he wasn't there for that, so I think it was around 1988, 1987 perhaps, that he moved back to Taiwan. And my mother and I stayed in Cupertino, which was a city that nobody knew at the time, but now everyone has preconceptions about.

00:12:31 Jesse Host  
00:12:34 Hua Guest

Why did your dad move to Taiwan? I think, ultimately, he moved because there's just more opportunities. Like, he had been—he'd come to the United States to get a graduate education. You know, he had these minor dreams of going into academia. You know, maybe becoming a professor. That didn't really pan out, and so he became an engineer. And we lived in Texas for a while, then we moved to southern California, and eventually the Bay Area. I think he just got tired of the American corporate ladder. Like, it just seemed like there were more opportunities for career advancement for doing the kind of things he wanted to do back in Taiwan.

And you know, living in Cupertino, it was the type of place where it wasn't actually that unusual for your dad to move back to Taiwan to work and for the rest of the family to stay behind. Like, I would go to the airport for winter break and just see my classmates, and we were all either like going to Taiwan together or picking up our dads. And so, I mean, it wasn't like so common, but it was common enough where it made it seem like—you know, this is just an arrangement that people can have. Like this is another version of a family.

00:14:02 Jesse Host So, I think he went in part just to kind of see what he could actually do in this new industry of semi-conductors.  
More with Hua Hsu after the break. Stay with us. It's *Bullseye*, from [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and NPR.

00:14:10 Music Transition Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

00:14:15 Jesse Host Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. If you're just joining us, I'm talking with writer Hua Hsu. He's a professor of English at Bard College, a staff writer for *The New Yorker*, and he has a new memoir, called *Stay True*. The book is about the relationships that defined his adolescence and young adulthood, and how they reflected and refracted his relationship with his own Americanness. Let's get back into our conversation.

In a way, your dad became kind of a double immigrant, because of how much Taiwan had changed while he was in the United States.

*[Hua confirms.]*

00:15:00 Hua Guest And because so much of his personal world had transferred to the States in the time that—you know—after he made the move.  
Yeah. And I mean, this is one thing that I've talked to him about, and there is this sort of—I don't wanna say—there is this sort of trope within kind of Asian American kids of my generation. You know, if your parents—if your parents were the immigrants and you were raised here, there's this trope that they sacrificed everything for you. Right? That they came to this country, that they endured all of that loneliness, that confusion, they had to sort of piece their careers together. They did it all so that you could have a life here. Right? And that as a result of this, people of my generation—like 1.5, second generation, like we have this indebtedness to our parents.

And you know, I think that's certainly true. Like, I do feel indebted to them in some way, but I remember having a conversation with them about how, you know, it's like incredible that you made all these sacrifices so that I could have this life in America. And my dad was like, "Uh, I didn't actually do any of that for you. Like, when we left Taiwan in the 1970s, you know, there wasn't that much there. It wasn't necessarily a prosperous place. And so, we left for ourselves. And you happened to have come along, but you don't need to feel as though we sacrificed anything for you. Like, we did that on our own for ourselves." And it was really interesting to hear that, because it was a story that I had been telling myself so much. Right? Just that there was this thing that bonds us.

00:16:41 Jesse Host And you know, there is still a thing that bonds us, but it's much more nuanced than the lessons I'd learned in class.  
You grew into a kind of classic alternative teen.

*[Hua agrees with a laugh.]*

And you would write back and forth to your dad in Taiwan. You and your mom would go stay in Taiwan during breaks and in the summer and so forth. You'd all be together. But in the times that

you were in the States, during the school year, you would send each other faxes.

*[Hua confirms.]*

First of all, it's such an unusual medium for intimate communication.

*[Chuckles.]*

00:17:16 Hua Guest Yeah, yeah. It is. 'Cause faxes are so corporate. You know? I mean, do people—is it common knowledge what faxes are, even?

*[Jesse laughs.]*

00:17:29 Jesse Host I have no idea. I had to—I had to find a fax machine a year or two ago to fax something to someone, but yeah. I mean, I think people remember the fax machine if they're—at least if they're over, uh, 30 or so, I would guess. Right? But it was the first instantaneous text/picture communications that most of us had any access to. But mostly, they lived—you know, I never had a fax machine, and I lived most of my life in the fax machine era. It was just that it was something that law firms used to send messages to each other.

00:18:08 Hua Guest *[Laughs.]* Yeah, it wasn't—it wasn't really something for household use. You know? Because even though it was this pretty novel form of communication, the way it worked—like, it would print on this thermal paper, and it would just—it would never look as good as whatever the original letter was. So, that might be fine for a document, but you know, it just feels as though this letter that you've written your father or that your father's written you has been like run through like a washing machine or something. Like, it just—everything just arrives looking a little bit off.

00:18:45 Jesse Host It's curly and smudgy.

*[Hua agrees.]*

There's a letter in the book your father faxed you that I was so touched by that it was one of those things where I was reading your book next to my wife in bed, and I made her stop doing whatever she was doing so I could read it to her. And it's—in a way—pretty kind of quotidian for being so touching. Maybe it's touching because it's so quotidian. But I wondered if you might read it for us.

*[Hua agrees.]*

And you say that this is something that he wrote you after he was concerned that he had been too stern with you in a previous message.

00:19:24 Hua Guest Yeah, I think—I mean, so much of my book is about things that you don't realize 'til much later. Right? Which is I think just how life generally is. Like, it's hard to—you know that you should be present. It's hard to be present. And it's impossible, basically, to be present when you're a teenager. And so, I think whenever my father would be too stern with me or—you know, whenever he would be—you know, maybe he felt like he'd been overly critical, I probably didn't register it as such. But he would always sort of write this follow-up and be like, "Uh, I just need to like explain why I have worry or why I have concern or why I said what I said."

So, I'll just read it now.

"Last Friday, I overemphasized the toughness. Don't be scared. The life is full of excitement and surprises. Handle it and enjoy it. Just like you said that you like the cross-country exercise, after climbing the hill—looking downward—you feel good. That is the point I would like to make. Don't feel frustrated climbing, climbing. Also, don't pick a too-high mountain to climb and begin with. You need to drill the small hill first. Learn from the exercise. Even a tumble can teach you how to climb, next time. It's sweating but enjoy the process.

"Mom and I have been proud of you, not only on your accomplishment, but more on your happy personality. We'll support you, whatever you choose. Most time, Hua, don't feel bad if sometimes we were too nervous. We just hope to give you all our guidance and help to make your decisions simpler. We might put too much pressure on you, but that's not what we mean. Be relaxed but arrange your time to handle priorities. I feel sorry that I cannot be around all the time to support you in whatever you need, but I feel comfortable since Mom can do a good job and you are quite mature. But if there's any thoughts or problem, call me or fax me. If it's classwork and you cannot get my timely help, please tell us. We can arrange some tutoring. 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grade take more sweat, but I hope you enjoy them. Love, Dad."

00:21:38 Jesse Host

In so many of these letters, your father asks you what you think. And that's not something that we always associate with parental wisdom. It was something that I thought was a really conspicuous choice that your dad made to connect with you in that way.

00:22:00 Hua Guest

Yeah, and it's fascinating to me, because I don't know that he was making a choice. You know, when we talk—back and then and even now—he tends to favor the monologue to the spirited tête-à-tête. But you know, he's very curious. Like, he is always asking me these questions that I often can't actually answer. Like, I remember after—it might have been after the Angels/Giants series of 2003, was it? 2002 or 2003? But it was after some sort of crushing loss to a team that I was deeply invested in. You know, he was like, "Why do people like sports?"

*[Jesse laughs.]*

And he didn't mean that in this way—he wasn't being critical. You know? Or he wasn't really trying to like troll me. But he really wanted to know—like philosophically—like what is it about watching competition that like you feel invested in? And you know, like I've learned over the years that like when he asks me questions, he actually wants to know why I like sports—like, why people like sports. And so, yeah, he remains this very curious person. Although, he's probably more opinionated than he comes across in some of these—some of the facts that I reproduced.

00:23:25 Jesse Host

When you went to college—you went to college at UC Berkeley.

*[Hua confirms.]*

00:23:48 Hua Guest What was your first cultural impression of meeting people who were mostly from all over California, but also all over the country? You know, so I went to Berkeley, and one of the things that drew me to Berkeley was I was really into high school debate. And so, I went to Berkeley for a debate tournament I think my junior year. And it was like the best two days of my life up until that point. Like, it was the first time a girl held my hand. Like, it was the first time I—you know—could just walk down the street and buy slices of pizza. Like, I would—in between rounds of the debate tournament, we would just like wander around Telegraph like looking—and I was just overwhelmed by how many places there were to buy stuff that I was into, whether it was like magazines, CDs, records, books. Bumper stickers that said, “Visualize world peace.”

00:24:37 Jesse Host  
00:24:39 Hua Guest Yeah, absolutely. So, I already had this impression that like I had to go to this place, because it was just filled with the things I liked. Therefore, it must also be filled with people just like me. You know? Who were buying those things. And the summer before I started at Berkeley, I was like a counselor at a debate camp in Berkeley, so I was there for the summer. And like debaters are like pretty weird people, so everyone was like into punk rock or like, you know, a chain-smoker or just sort of like into communism. And so, I had this really inflated sense of like what the average Berkley student was going to be like based on these experiences.

And so, when I finally moved into the dorms, I moved in with two of my really good friends from high school. But in a way, I was kind of like, you know, we're good friends but I'm gonna make other friends here who are way more like my people, like people who are gonna recognize why I dress the way I do or why I buy records versus CDs. You know. And yeah, I was shocked by how many people were just from southern California, and they were almost exactly like the people from northern California, except they called 101 The 101, or 280 like The 280.

*[Jesse chuckles.]*

And I was honestly kind of disappointed. I was like, “I thought there would be way more like “cool people”—air quotes, like very specific sense of what that meant for me at the time—at Berkeley, in my dorm. And there weren't. There were just a lot of people from Los Angeles. A lot of people from like a nearby high school from the one I went to. A lot of people from my high school. And a few people from places that, by virtue of not being northern California or Los Angeles, seemed exotic, like Bakersfield or San Diego. Yeah, and so it took me a while to actually just wrap my head around and appreciate kind of the diversity of California and just the people who were there at Berkeley with me.

00:27:01 Jesse Host But you know, it also took me a while to find like the other kid who was wearing like an old mechanic's jacket or Vans or whatever it was I was into. The main person that you write about from your college years was one of your first best pals in college—a guy named Ken who was from the San Diego area and was different from you in a lot of ways. Not super alternative. Very handsome and charismatic and chill in a particularly San Diegan way. Like, there's a part where you



00:27:31 00:27:38	Hua Jesse	Guest Host	<p>talk about him describing [<i>chuckles</i>] just like how pretty and happy everyone is [<i>laughing</i>] in southern California.</p> <p>Yeah, and I was like that sounds like hell to me.</p> <p>[<i>Laughs.</i>] One of the fine distinctions that you point out about his difference from you is that, you know, at Berkeley—especially in the '90s—you were joined together by virtue of both being Asian American, but he was Japanese American, and you know, Japanese American culture in California runs often many generations deep. You know, there are a lot of Japanese American people who are sixth and eighth generation Californians, relative to Taiwanese people, where there are a lot of people whose families came around when yours did. What was the significance of that difference to the two of you?</p>
00:28:38	Hua	Guest	<p>Like, what was it like for you to walk around and probably have people see both of you as two Asian American guys hanging out when you had that very different cultural context?</p> <p>Yeah, I mean, when we first met, he was someone who I just instantly dismissed. And I tend to be like that, where I'll just say like, I'm never gonna be friends with that person! Then, next thing I know, I'm like this is like my person. You know? But he was this frat guy from San Diego. I didn't think we had anything really in common, because we were into such different things. But you know, one of the things we would talk about a lot in a very unformed way—a very unacademic way, 'cause like we hadn't taken the classes or studied the history yet—was just, you know, how different our experiences were as Asian Americans and yet how indistinguishable we would be to most other people. You know?</p>
			<p>It's not like there's so many Asian Americans that—it's a distinction that's familiar, I think, to people within the community, but it's such a small community that it's not a distinction that anyone outside of it really notices, right? Just this sense that there are people whose families came in the 1800s, the early 1900s. There are people who came before the civil rights era and after the civil rights era. And so, for me, even growing up in the south Bay, I would always look at Japanese Americans, because they often came—you know, they'd gone through World War II. Like, their families had been part of Japanese internment. Their parents spoke with no accent. They seemed just more Americanized than my family. And he was instantly someone I recognized as that. Like, I felt like his ability to be more comfortable in his own skin, in my mind I projected onto him was like the result of him being this like—you know—second or third generation Japanese American.</p>
00:31:06	Jesse	Host	<p>Whereas for me, you know, like even though I appreciated my family and like, you know, the route that took us to Cupertino—you know, there was just—there were still these moments where you feel a bit like an outsider or a bit kind of marginal. And it didn't bother me as much, but it was always eye opening to see these people who were like so much more comfortable in these spaces.</p> <p>Was it hard to imagine yourself being friends with someone who was—who had the comfort of being handsome and charismatic?</p>
00:31:19	Hua	Guest	<p>No, it was more that it was just unexpected. You know, I think it was one of those things where—you know, college just allows you this opportunity to reboot your personality. You can do it—at a UC, you</p>

could probably do it like eight times, right? Because it's such a big school, you're just gonna be in new classes, surrounded by new people every semester. So, it wasn't something I thought about, but it was more like, "Oh, it's kind of—it's funny that like, you know, I have these friends who are so different from me. Particularly this friend." But you know, over time you realize that the people who stick around, the people who are patient and open with you—you know, those are the friendships that actually last.

And so, yeah. I think very quickly I became really—I don't know, just really happy that I had this person who was this confidant and sounding board, but who did not see the world the way I did.

00:32:19 Jesse Host

One of the things that the two of you obsessed over together was the kind of tropes of pop culture, that world of the like slightly generic sitcoms and things like that. And especially the like little ways that Asian Americans would be glimpsed within them. Is there one that you remember particularly from those days? A little something that you obsessed over?

00:32:53 Hua Guest

Not really, because there were so few. You know? So, I didn't really—you know, you would notice things, but this was pre-YouTube, so you know, we had these lists we would write down, but it was just sort of like a memory you thought you once had. You know? But I do remember one thing that we talked about a lot was how like *The Real World* casting director came to his frat house. I read about this in the book. And I thought that Ken went to the casting thing because he wanted to be on the show. And I was convinced that he would be on it, 'cause I'm like, "You know what, he's actually a pretty charismatic, handsome person."

But in reality, you know, one of the reasons he went was to kind of ask this producer like why, in this moment of multicultural acceptance and kind of alternative points of view, like this is the '90s, like why had there never been an Asian American male on the show. And you know, she sort of dismissed it. She was like, "Eh, they just don't have the personalities for it." And that was something we talked about a lot.

Like, I would still sort of make fun of him having gone in the first place and being like, "Who cares about MTV? Like, *The Real World* is stupid." And all these things. But it was this moment where I could sort of glimpse one of our differences—was that he actually was unafraid to want more out of these things that had shaped us. You know, even if it was something that I could dismiss in my kind of like read-too-much-critical-theory way, about like the banality of television. Like, these things had still shaped us, and I think he wanted to dream of something more.

00:34:41 Jesse Host

I get the impression from the book that he was a little bit more willing to open himself to the disappointment of something like that.

00:34:54 Hua Guest

Yeah. I mean, I think that he—you know, for quite a while... you know, like when I think about why I wrote this, part of it is because he is someone whose open-mindedness, whose like open—his open heart was something that I couldn't really appreciate—you know—when we were much younger. And it's something that I've thought about a lot. But yeah, he was definitely more willing to be disappointed, because he was also willing to demand more and to open himself up to—to open himself up to ambitions of that scale is

00:35:43	Jesse	Host	inevitably going to—a much braver act than me kind of lobbing my spitballs from the corner. We'll wrap up with Hua Hsu in just a little bit. I mentioned at the top that his book, <i>Stay True</i> , is about his most intimate relationships. Later on, I'll talk with him about one that turned tragic. It's <i>Bullseye</i> , from <a href="http://MaximumFun.org">MaximumFun.org</a> and NPR.
00:36:00	Promo	Clip	<b>Music:</b> Dramatic synth.

**Andrew Reich:** *[Dramatically.]* Since the dawn of time, man has dreamed of bringing life back from the dead. From Orpheus and Eurydice to Frankenstein's monster, resurrection has long been merely the stuff of myth, fiction, and fairytale. Until now!

*[Record scratch.]*

Actually, we still can't bring people back from the dead.

*[The music turns upbeat and brassy.]*

*[Chuckling.]* That would be crazy! But *The Dead Pilots Society* podcast has found a way to resurrect great dead comedy podcasts from Hollywood's finest writers. Every month, *Dead Pilots Society* brings you a reading of a comedy pilot that was sold and developed, but never produced, performed by the funniest actors from film and television. How does *Dead Pilots Society* achieve this miracle? The answer can only be found at [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org).

00:36:43	Music	Transition
00:36:47	Jesse	Host

*[Music fades out.]*

Chiming synth with a steady beat.

This is *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. I'm talking with writer Hua Hsu. He's on staff at *The New Yorker*. His new memoir is called *Stay True*.

You write so beautifully about your friend Ken that—not knowing much about the book before I started reading it—I thought to myself, “Are they in love?”

*[Hua chuckles.]*

“Is that what this book is about?” Like, you kept talking about him having an easier way with girls and different kinds of relationships, and I went like, “Man, like gosh, he—like, he's—he writes so intimately about this guy. Like, I didn't know that about him, but that's really interesting. I guess they're falling in love.” And late in this story, Ken is murdered. And it's a pretty random crime.

00:37:44	Hua	Guest
00:37:46	Jesse	Host

Yeah. Very random.

Yeah, and as one would imagine, it dramatically rearranges your life.

*[Hua agrees.]*

And I started realizing that, you know, to the extent that the book was about themes, it wasn't so much about even necessarily like identity or even your relationship with this really special friend, but the question of like how and when you could tell a story, especially about yourself. I was shocked to hear you talking about—writing in

the book about writing to him almost every day after he was killed. What led you to do that? And did it always feel like the right thing to be doing?

00:39:01 Hua Guest

Yeah, I mean, in a way, the book is—in a way, the book is about writing. You know, and the book is about kind of why I've—it's just sort of something that's been in the back of my mind as I've worked as a writer for almost 20 years. You know, in the immediate aftermath, when we all found out that he was no longer around, I just started writing because it seemed a natural way of coping, of not being present but just kind of honoring the present. At a very basic level, I just wanted to remember everything. I wanted the inside jokes—you know, the minor adventures. Like, I wanted it all to be something that I could reflect on at a later date when I felt up to it.

And so, yeah, I just immediately started writing. Some of it was to him. Some of it was to myself, hoping that he was reading along somewhere else. And it's something that continued after that week. I gave the eulogy—or I gave one of the eulogies at his funeral. And it was a collaborative effort. I think it was because I was always writing. Everyone was like, "Ah, you should just—you should probably do it since you already have some stuff written down. And after I finished, it felt so freeing in that moment to have found language to describe what I was feeling, what other people were feeling. And I sort of craved that sensation again. So, I just continued writing.

And for years, I would keep this journal. I would also just have these documents that would move from laptop to laptop to now desktop, 'cause I don't use laptops anymore. And I would just write about the past, and I would write about him, and I would write to him. And so yeah, I just sort of had 20/22 years' worth of notes accumulated when I actually sat down to write what became the book, *Stay True*.

00:41:11 Jesse Host

Why did you think that you could write about it publicly when previously you had spent so long writing about it privately?

00:41:21 Hua Guest

I didn't think I could. I wasn't sure I could. It seemed to me like a book—like, earlier in my life. Like, it was just sort of something that I felt I needed to do. There are probably other forms of self-care or therapy that, you know, could've substituted for just relentlessly writing. But it's just something that I did, and I wasn't entirely sure that it was a book or that it would become a book. And it wasn't until—you know, fairly recently. I started writing this in 2019—it wasn't until I wrote it that I knew I could actually write it. If that makes sense. Like, if I talked about it in 2019/2020, it didn't materialize. But if I actually just sat down and tried to do it, like something would happen that had never happened before.

And so, I just sort of went with it. And when I was done, I was like, "Yeah, I guess there might be something here beyond kind of like 300 pages of me vomiting onto a page."

00:42:39 Jesse Host

Did you think about how remarkable and unusual it is that this person that was—you know—someone you knew for a few years changed your life so dramatically and stayed so close with you for so long, even after he wasn't around anymore?

00:43:08 Hua Guest No. I mean, I didn't think that, because I was experiencing it. And to some extent, maybe I was choosing to experience it, but it didn't really—I don't know. I didn't think it was that weird.

00:43:21 Jesse Host I mean, I don't know if it's weird, but it's kind of—like, to me, it doesn't strike me as weird at all, but it does strike me as kind of incredible. Like, those circumstances can change your life so extraordinarily. I mean, it makes sense. It's not weird.

00:43:40 Hua Guest Yeah, I don't know. I mean, incredible seems like—I thought it was unusual. You know. Like, I think it was—it was a deeply unusual thing to happen. And that kind of cast a shadow over what followed. But yeah, I mean, I think for a lot of my friends, for a lot of people who he touched, it was a very difficult thing to move on from or to move forward with, rather. And I was just one of those people. I happened to also just kind of choose a profession which would kind of compel me to think about other people or to think about people's stories or think about meaning and beauty and things that would always return me to that original point where I would just be on this balcony debating with this person who I thought I had nothing in common with, but who I think I ended up sharing a worldview with.

00:44:43 Jesse Host There's a part in the book where you write about Puff Daddy rapping about Biggie being killed. And obviously, that song is—you know—one of the most maudlin hit records ever recorded. Like, it couldn't be more. And there's a line in there that you highlight where Puffy says that it feels kind of weird.

00:45:08 Hua Guest It was kind of hard. Yeah.

00:45:10 Jesse Host Kind of hard. Yeah. And it's that "kinda" that is so extraordinary about that line.

*[Hua agrees.]*

00:45:38 Hua Guest Because it so perfectly recognizes that like... that death is so arbitrary and life is so arbitrary, that we're like, "Here we are, in life." Yeah. It felt so casual, you know, for him to put it that way. Like, it's kinda hard that you're not around. I think that's the line. And you know, it's also just the euphemism of like "not around". It was such a cheesy song to me before. But then after I thought, you know, Puff nailed it. Like, it's kinda hard. You know? And just the interplay of like 112, Faith Evans, Puff—like, it's a great gesture. You know, I don't know if it's like the best song, but as a gesture, as a structure of like these three artists kind of taking turns—not necessarily trying to outdo one another but trying to complement one another. I think it's just—it's kind of incredible, you know, when you think about it that way.

00:46:39 Jesse Host But when I heard it before, I just thought like this is so corny. But when I needed it, it was definitely something that meant something more to me.

00:46:59 Hua Guest The book is your story. You know. It's about you and it is from you. It is also a documentation of this person that you loved who can't speak for themselves. Were you scared of that part of it?

00:46:59 Hua Guest Yeah, absolutely. I was terrified of that part of it. It is my story, and it is about me. And I think ultimately like I'm the only real caricature in the book. *[Chuckles.]* Like, I think there's a lot about me that I'm poking fun at or maybe exaggerating for effect. But you know, I've had people say that they get a very strong sense of who he was and his effect on people, but they can't necessarily picture him.

Like, he's not necessarily rendered in this molecular way. And I think that's probably somewhat intentional. Like, he does—you know, he's like a hero almost to me. So, it's very hard to kind of then reduce him to like flesh and bones.

But I was very—I was very anxious about doing that and just about—you know, representing someone who is so concerned about representation, on one hand. But I don't know, like I hope I wrote about him in a way that actually honors him.

00:48:11	Jesse	Host	Well, Hua Hsu, I'm so grateful to you for taking all of this time to talk to me and for this beautiful book and your other work that I admire so much. Thank you for coming on the show.
00:48:21	Hua	Guest	Thanks so much for, you know, taking the time with the book and asking such incredible questions. I'm really grateful.
00:48:29	Jesse	Host	Hua Hsu. His new book is called <i>Stay True</i> . It's really something special. You can get it at your local bookstore.
00:48:37	Music	Transition	Twangy synth with a steady beat.
00:48:40	Jesse	Host	That's the end of another episode of <i>Bullseye</i> . <i>Bullseye</i> is created from the homes me and the staff of Maximum Fun, in and around greater Los Angeles, California. I actually was outside of greater Los Angeles, California, this week. I headed up to Marin county, because my brother-in-law, Danny, and his beautiful wife, Adriana, had a wedding reception. And it was really nice to see people, especially family and people that I loved. So, congratulations Danny and Adriana.

Our 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. Special thanks this week to Pat Stango at Penguin for recording our interview with Hua Hsu. Our interstitial music is by DJW, also known as Dan Wally. Thanks to Dan for going with us to comedy show the other day. We went to see Joe Perrow. It was a lot of fun. Our theme song is called "Huddle Formation". It was written and recorded by The Go! Team. Thanks to The Go! Team and to Memphis Industries, their label, for letting us use that song.

*Bullseye* is on YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook. You can find us on all of those platforms, and we will share our interviews with you. I hope that you will then share them with others. And I think that's about it. Just remember: all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

00:50:14	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.
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*[Music fades out.]*