

00:00:00	Music	Transition	Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.
00:00:01	Promo	Promo	<b>Speaker:</b> <i>Bullseye with Jesse Thorn</i> is a production of <a href="http://MaximumFun.org">MaximumFun.org</a> and is distributed by NPR.
00:00:14	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. Danny Elfman has made some of the most iconic and recognizable music of the last 50 years. He began his career as the band leader and eventually the front man of The Mystic Knights of the Oingo Boingo, an avantgarde performance troupe in Los Angeles. The Mystic Knights turned into just Oingo Boingo, a new wave band that was as distinctive and unusual as it was popular. Which is to say, very, very popular.
00:00:52	Music	Music	“Dead Man’s Party” from the album <i>Dead Man’s Party</i> by Oingo Boingo.  <i>I'm all dressed up with nowhere to go Walkin' with a dead man over my shoulder I'm all dressed up with nowhere to go Walkin' with a dead man over my shoulder</i>  <i>[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.]</i>
00:01:19	Jesse	Host	In 1985, he scored his first film, <i>Pee-Wee’s Big Adventure</i> , followed by other iconic movies like <i>Batman</i> , <i>Beetlejuice</i> , <i>Mission Impossible</i> , and <i>The Nightmare Before Christmas</i> .
00:01:30	Music	Music	“This Is Halloween” from <i>The Nightmare Before Christmas</i> .  <i>...catch you in the back And scream like a banshee Make you jump out of your skin This is Halloween, everybody scream Won't you please make way for a very special guy Our man Jack is king of the Pumpkin Patch Everyone hail to the Pumpkin King now This is Halloween, this is Halloween Halloween, Halloween Halloween, Halloween</i>  <i>In this place we call home Everyone hail to the pumpkin song</i>  <i>[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.]</i>
00:02:01	Jesse	Host	Oh, and I mean, we don’t wanna forget this one.
00:02:04	Music	Music	“The Simpsons Theme” from <i>The Simpsons</i> .  <i>The Simpsons</i>  <i>[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.]</i>
00:02:17	Jesse	Host	All in all, Elfman has scored over 100 movies and TV shows. He’s won a bunch of awards and the respect of film and music fans alike.

00:02:41	Music	Music	<p>The man has done a lot! He could just kick up his heels for a while. But Danny Elfman isn't taking it easy. Last year, he released his first solo rock album in over three decades: <i>Big Mess</i>. "Sorry" from the album <i>Big Mess</i> by Danny Elfman.</p> <p><i>There isn't time for revolution There isn't time to evolutionize or hide Those things most precious</i></p> <p><i>[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.]</i></p>
00:03:04	Jesse	Host	<p>This year, he's followed it up with another project: <i>Bigger. Messier..</i> The album features remixes of the songs from <i>Big Mess</i> by artists like Trent Reznor, Xui Xui, and Iggy Pop.</p> <p>Conducting today's interview with Elfman is our correspondent, Brian Heater. Brian's a longtime friend of our program, an editor at TechCrunch, and the host of the podcast <i>Recommended if You Like</i>, or just <i>RIYL</i>, where he interviews musicians, cartoonists, and more. Before we get into Brian and Danny, let's kick things off with a track from <i>Bigger. Messier..</i> This is a remix of Elfman's song, "We Belong", produced by the electronic musician, Squarepusher. "We Belong (Squarepusher Remix)" from the album <i>Bigger. Messier.</i> by Danny Elfman.</p> <p><i>I think I know you</i></p> <p><i>We've lived and died so many times</i></p> <p><i>[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.]</i></p>
00:03:44	Music	Music	
00:04:26	Brian Heater	Host	Danny Elfman, welcome to <i>Bullseye</i> !
00:04:28	Danny Elfman	Guest	Oh, thank you for having me. Glad to be here.
00:04:30	Brian	Host	Absolutely. So, we just heard a track off of <i>Bigger and Messier</i> , that's a new, remix album. It's a remix of last year's <i>Big Mess</i> , which was your first rock—your first album of new rock songs since the mid-'90s.
00:04:43	Danny	Guest	Since the late 1800s, actually.
00:04:46	Brian	Host	<i>[Laughs.]</i> What was your process for this new record? Did you collaborate directly with the artists, or did you effectively send the songs off into the world and hope for the best?
00:04:56	Danny	Guest	Well, it was kind of two separate processes. Because there's a whole bunch of these remixes which, in fact—you know, I just connected with people that I thought were good artists, interesting, and let them choose any track they wish and do whatever they wish with it. And then there's these, you know, five or so—I don't know what the word is, where other singers are coming in and reinterpreting songs with their own voices. And that was a little more of a collaborative process of like finding people and talking, at least in email or in actual speaking, and you know, coming up with an idea.
			And so, they all got put together on <i>Bigger. Messier..</i> So, you've got the reinterpretations and the remixes.

00:05:51	Brian	Host	In the cases of those remixes—you know, where you really did sort of, you know, send them off and let somebody effectively, you know, have their way with the song—is that a scary process to give up that level of control on one of your own songs?
00:06:06	Danny	Guest	Well, yeah. Real scary, for me. Because you know, I've been a control freak my whole life. And not intentionally uncollaborative, but the fact that I've only got one collaboration in 40 years <i>[chuckling]</i> kind of says a lot. You know, other than Siouxsie and the Banshees collaboration on <i>Batman Returns</i> in, you know, 1990 or whatever year it was, I've not collaborated with another artist. I've always been kind of in a bubble often, myself. So, it's not been like a stubborn "I won't", but on the other hand, I feel like I was in a zone that just collaboration wasn't—didn't make sense, because—I don't even know why, to be honest. So, but then—you know, getting into film scoring—I mean, between Oingo Boingo and the film scoring and The Mystic Knights, I was always a control freak.

I mean, I'm pretty obsessive. I—you know, of 110 film scores, I've had my hands on faders, mixing, probably 109 of them. And you know, that's just how I'm wired. You know? Fingers on faders has always been my way. And so, this process is something I'd never experienced before, really. And it made it exceptionally cool, because it was like a discipline for myself, to like not only collaborate, but intentionally to not control what they do. Really, to exert no control. And I just got into it. And that was the fun. You know? When you were just playing a little bit of Squarepusher—you know, I talked with Tom and Squarepusher when—he was the first of the remixes when we first started. And I just—the only advice I gave him was just do your thing. Don't try to please me. Just like, you know, do whatever you would do, and I'll be appreciative for it. And not having any idea of what was gonna come in.

And then that process got repeated like 20 more times. *[Chuckles.]* And every time, something really different. And it's just really cool, because sometimes it'd be really spacy and mellow and sometimes it'd be super intensive. Well, I mean, okay. I mean, I could've guessed that Zach Hill from Death Grips or GHOSTEMANE was gonna—or Machine Girl were gonna come up with something pretty intense. Because you know, hearing their music. But I had no idea what anybody was gonna do. And I really, really enjoyed that process of kind of giving myself up to others and to having—not even trying to sway what direction they'll go. Which even included the singers who worked on it. And Oblixa—it was like just, hey, pick a song if you want. I'm so honored that you wanna do it. And interpret it any way you wish.

Trent Reznor—I mean, I was so surprised by him getting involved. And he just asked my bass player, he said, "You know, send over some tracks. Let me see." Next thing I knew, he sent over two songs. So, *[laughs]* I mean. And it was just kind of like that. You know? Iggy Pop wrote me this great email kind of explaining what he would like to do, which I'm so happy for that. *[Laughs.]* It's like oh my god, I've got this really cool email from Iggy kind of telling, in really great detail, how he would approach the song "Kick Me", which he really loved, conversationally. And why he wanted to do that. And—but if—you know, if it's not my thing, if I didn't really

00:10:04	Music	Music	<p>wanna go that way, it was like fine. But I was like, “Uh, Mr. Pop.”  <i>[Laughs.]</i> It’s like, “Really, just do your thing. Uh. I love the idea that you’re involved with this project, and I don’t even wanna try to influence you one way or another.”</p> <p>“Kick Me” from the album <i>Bigger. Messier.</i> by Danny Elfman and Iggy Pop.</p> <p><i>Kick me, I'm a celebrity</i>  <i>Kick me, I'm a celebrity</i>  <i>Hey, kick me, I'm a celebrity</i>  <i>Kick me, I'm a celebrity</i>  <i>Losers not invited</i>  <i>Losers not invited</i></p> <p><i>Look now, everybody can see</i>  <i>Look now</i></p> <p><i>[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.]</i></p>
00:10:42	Brian	Host	Was it clear over the course of Oingo Boingo that you weren’t—that collaboration wasn’t the right process for you? I mean, did you like increasingly, effectively take creative control over the band?
00:10:53	Danny	Guest	Well, I mean, I’m ashamed to say this, but you know, this is kind of why Oingo Boingo years were frustrating for me and for them, I think. Because I just, from the very get-go, I just had like a sense of “This is what we’re doing.” And you know, I was the only songwriter for 17 years, which really isn’t great <i>[chuckles]</i> all the way around. You know, it wasn’t the Beatles. And I feel bad about that, for them. But also, I was very frustrated. I really had a sense of where I wanted to go, and then not that long into the process, even being in a band was too confining for me, and I started getting frustrated.
00:12:25	Brian	Host	<p>So, there was a point where it was like we had to go our own ways, because there was frustration I think on both sides. But I just wasn’t collaborative in that particular arena. I just—you know, I came in with the songs, and I had a sense of what I wanted to do with them. And so, I mean, you know, I happen to have incredible hindsight. I’ve got really poor foresight, but my hindsight is excellent. And <i>[chuckles]</i> if I was going back in time, I’d probably—you know, work it differently and make it more suitable for all concerned. But you know, we can’t do that, can we?</p> <p>Sure, you say it wasn’t the Beatles, but the Beatles lasted—what?—ten years, beginning to end. I mean, obviously that dynamic doesn’t necessarily work out either. And certainly, a lot of the musicians—</p>
00:12:36	Danny	Guest	Well, it’s true, but they were a lot more collaborative as a band. They all got to—you know—inject their ideas into the stuff, at least. And so, I can imagine that must have been very frustrating for members of my band. But you know, I was just— <i>[laughs]</i> I don’t know how else to say it. I was a difficult character in that regard. I think had I been pushed—if push came to shove at that moment, I just would’ve stopped and done something else. So, I don’t know. You know. It was always—it was a weird time for me, because I’ve got such a short attention span. You know? In the late ’70s, I suddenly heard ska music from England.

*[Music fades in.]*

And it's like, "Oh! Yeah! I wanna do ska. I'm gonna be in a ska band. I wanna do that." And even though I'd been working on this theatre troupe for seven/eight years, I just stopped it overnight and just launched a band.

00:13:30     Music             Music

*I don't want seem frantic  
I don't want to cramp your style (cramp your style)  
You're driving me into a panic  
You just want to drive me, drive me,  
Drive me, drive me wild*

*Oh baby, you drive me wild!  
I want to kiss every night  
To squeeze and to hold you tight*

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

00:14:02     Danny             Guest

Every two years, I wanted to be in a different band. I wanted the band to be a different band. I don't stick with anything very long, and that's like a problem. When you're in a band, you can't just keep changing your skin. You know, unless you're David Bowie. But very few people are able to achieve that, to really change their skins constantly and have their fans not go, "Hey. Hey, what the hell's going on?" You know? And I get it, because if I go see a band I really love that's from my—you know, that I've known for a number of years, I wanna hear the songs that brought me into that band. And it might be a lot of their early songs. And if I don't hear them live, you know, I'm gonna feel kind of cheated. So, I get it! You know what I mean?

A band—people—an audience wants to hear the songs that they connect to with any band. And if the band keeps going, "No, we don't wanna play those anymore," or if an artist says, "I don't wanna play those anymore; I wanna just do my new stuff," they might—the audience might start getting frustrated. And yet, if the artist can't do that, they'll get frustrated. So, it's a tough dynamic.

00:15:05     Brian             Host

You have toured and continue to tour on a lot of the scores that you've written. Is your relationship with that music different when it comes to playing a piece of music over and over again?

00:15:16     Danny             Guest

Well, I mean, touring with the band was really hard because of that. I developed a real respect for the bands that can spend ten months a year and decades—you know—touring with the same material. It's like—and I developed a real respect for theatre artists. I go, "My god! What would it be like being on Broadway, playing this show for years?" Maybe—is it eight shows a week? You know, two shows on the weekends? It's like—or theatre in general, doing the same part every night. I don't understand how they do that, so I have great respect for it. Because for me, I'd go on the road and after two months, I never wanted to play a single song again. I was like going crazy. You know, three months was the most I was ever able to tour.

00:16:02     Jesse             Host

We've got so much more to get into with Danny Elfman. When we return from a quick break, he talks to us about making the transition

00:16:19	Music	Transition	from rock musician to composer and why, in the latter field, he had to prove himself. It's <i>Bullseye</i> , from <a href="https://www.maximumfun.org">MaximumFun.org</a> and NPR.
00:16:23	Jesse	Host	Chiming synth with a steady beat. Welcome back to <i>Bullseye</i> . I'm Jesse Thorn. If you're just joining us, our guest is composer Danny Elfman. Danny is, of course, the man behind the scores of dozens of iconic movies and TV shows. He was also the front man of the new wave band, Oingo Boingo. Last year, he released his first solo rock album in over 30 years. It's called <i>Big Mess</i> . This year, he's followed it up with an ambitious remix project, called <i>Bigger. Messier..</i> It features contributions from Iggy Pop, Zach Hill, and more.
00:17:07	Music	Music	Elfman is here being interviewed by our correspondent, Brian Heater. Here's another track from <i>Bigger. Messier..</i> It's a remix of the song "In Time" from the electronic composer, Kaitlyn Aurelia Smith. "In Time (Kaitlyn Aurelia Smith Remix)" from the album <i>Bigger. Messier.</i> by Danny Elfman.  <i>In time, we all create ourselves In time...</i>  <i>[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.]</i>
00:17:52	Brian	Guest	It seems like the <i>Big Mess</i> project, the Coachella show that you did, all of these things were effectively a way to kind of develop a new relationship with the old songs. Were you able to reconnect and revisit that old music that you hadn't played for so long?
00:18:10	Danny	Guest	Yeah. I mean, it was interesting. When I agreed to do Coachella finally—you know—in 2019, my manager Laura had been trying to get me out there for a decade. And I was like resistant. And I finally went out there, and what actually flipped me over was seeing the video monitors. I just saw, wow, the potential here is so great with these huge, high-definition screens. And that's what made me think I could put on a crazy show that's just old stuff, new stuff, reinvented stuff all shoved together in this kind of crazy, insane way. And it made sense when I pitched it, that night.  <i>[They chuckle.]</i>  Then—you know, a year later, when I was putting the show together—I was going, "Oh my god. What the hell have I done? This doesn't make sense at all. I'm playing an Oingo Boingo song next to, you know, a new song next to "Spider-Man Theme" from <i>Spider-Man</i> or <i>Batman</i> . It was like—and just totally moshing them together, 'cause that was the original concept. Almost no space at all, just make the whole hour a real surrealistic kind of event, and then just throw these insane visuals on the screens. But when I was trying to do it later, believe me, I had more than a little apprehension about whether—  Let me put it this way. I, weeks before the show at Coachella—I thought, "I've just made the biggest error of my entire career. This is a trainwreck of my own design, and it's going off the tracks for sure."

00:19:53	Brian	Host	And <i>Big Mess</i> was effectively a direct result of putting that show together?
00:19:58	Danny	Guest	Well, yes, in the sense that the first time—back in 2020, I had done these two songs for that Coachella show. Which, that Coachella show was revamped Oingo Boingo and film, kind of 50/50 with these two new songs. And the two new songs was the exciting part for me, of like, “Oh boy, I get to like open the show with this insane, venomous piece I’ve just created, called ‘Sorry’.” And my managers were all going, “Danny, don’t open with that, please.” You know. “Open with something everybody knows and then just ease that in in the middle.”
			I go, “No, no. I wanna see people looking at me going, ‘What the [censored] are you doing?!’” That’s theatre for me. That’s exciting! To be able to do that. But then it all collapsed. Covid happened. And you know, I just holed myself up for a year, like everybody did. And I was pretty depressed, not to mention where America was in 2020, there. I mean, it was like—it really—I’m actually perceiving what I was always worried about my entire life is that, you know, this would become like a George Orwellian society. It’s like <i>1984</i> had a offshoot called <i>2020: America</i> . And the sense of nonreality—I was frustrated and angry. And so, you know, this stuff just had to happen.
			And because I had already been in rehearsal for Coachella, as I started to write songs—you know, in my kind of depression—they were guitar-based. Because I still had guitar in my fingers. You know, I’d been rehearsing with this great band. I was so excited about it. We’d done like seven or eight rehearsals. It was just starting to sound really good. And my excitement level with that was coming up. And suddenly, it’s all canceled. But you know, it might have been a completely different record had it not been for that, because already I was thinking when I went into seclusion, two things. One is electric guitar being the kind of center of it, and secondly, using orchestra. Because this first song that I created, “Sorry”, was something I’d been thinking about for a while, which was using a rock band and an orchestra in a way that I’m not used to hearing, where the orchestra actually becomes part of the engine of the rhythm section rather than just an embellishment.
			And so, I carried that into the next—into all 18 of the songs. And so, the fact that I was prepping for Coachella did definitely inform the template of where I was gonna go with <i>Big Mess</i> , even though nothing about <i>Big Mess</i> was planned. And it just happened spontaneously when I shut myself up. But the template, sonically, of what it became I think was already defined by where my brain was at in the beginning of 2020.
00:23:09	Brian	Guest	You described some of the—I guess the, you know, self-doubt when it came to actually putting this set of songs together for Coachella, but when the driving force here is to do something theatrical or experimental, isn’t self-doubt invariably going to be part of the process?
00:23:28	Danny	Guest	In everything I do, it’s part of my process. You know? I doubt everything I do all the time. That’s the one consistency I’ve had between The Mystic Knights—the theatre group—Oingo Boingo—the rock band—all the 110 film scores I’ve done, and now breaking

00:24:15	Brian	Host	into my first decade writing concert music, symphonic music. You know, I just had my seventh premier in seven years just a couple of weeks ago, in England. And I do this stuff because I gotta push out of my comfort zone. You know, <i>Big Mess</i> was definitely going way out of the zone that I'd been comfortably pocketed into with film music for the last 35 years. And the concert music just as much. So, I get the sense that film scoring wasn't something that you were necessarily seeking out, either—that it kind of effectively came to you.
00:24:25	Danny	Guest	Oh yeah, totally. Literally, when I started high school, I was starting to think about film as a possible career, and there were only two sides of filmmaking that I considered to be off the list, which was acting and composing. I had dreamed maybe an editor, a cinematographer. Of course, you know, maybe I'd become a writer or a director. Who knows, you know, at that point in my life. But I loved cinema. I loved film. But I had no musical training, and just that didn't seem like a possibility. And acting—I already knew that I was a <i>[censored]</i> actor. So, you know, that <i>[chuckles]</i> —that just was never gonna be a possibility.
00:25:11	Brian	Host	Yeah, although—you know, obviously there was something very theatrical about what The Mystic Knights did. I mean, there is some—there's a sense of acting or at least performance in a lot of what you do.
00:25:20	Danny	Guest	Well, yeah. I mean, performance in a very different kind of—it was called surreal cabaret, and I guess that's fairly accurate. That's far from actually acting. You know what I mean? It's like taking a character and taking it onstage in some kind of broad, really almost—you know—burlesque kind of way is a long distance from actually getting in front of a camera and acting. And I knew from a couple early experiences that if I have a camera on me, I freeze up. I don't know how actors do it. <i>[Chuckles.]</i> I mean, that's another profession that I have just this great, mystified admiration for how somebody with a camera six feet from their face—or maybe not six feet, but sometimes barely that—can completely do a love scene or an intimate scene or something with another actor as if the camera's not there.

I mean, that's amazing to me. I'm like aware. *[Laughs.]* I'm always aware if there's a camera rolling. Suddenly, every feature on my face becomes an independent creature. I become like a Portuguese Man o' War, which is a number of organisms actually kind of working together in a single form. My left eye and my right eye are totally independent. My mouth, what my face is doing overall is suddenly disunified craziness. And so, no, acting wasn't a possibility. And to me, composing wasn't a possibility, 'cause I had just assumed that to do that I had to be trained.

So, I came into film composing—I've often described it as this. You know, I live in Los Angeles, as you know. And our basketball team is the Lakers. And so, I grew up—you know—now and then watching Laker playoffs. And always, Jack Nicholson was sitting courtside. *[Chuckling.]* I just remember what it was—if I was watching a playoff game, there was Jack Nicholson. There's a shot of him there. He never missed a game. So, it's almost as if like somebody got injured on the court and tossed Jack the ball and said, "You're on the court! Come on! Let's go!" And that's sort of like



00:27:49	Brian	Host	when I got my first film score. It was like a fan who loved the sport of film composition as an observer suddenly getting tossed the ball and saying, "Go! Here you go! Now! No preparation, just now. Go!"
00:27:55	Danny	Guest	Is there a sense in which you're sort of still mystified by the process? Or does that eventually go away with time?
			Well, yeah, I mean hopefully after 38 years <i>[laughs]</i> , some of the mystery of the process kind of does go away. Other than there's a mysterious part of the process of where to find ideas that mystifies me as much now as my first score. And it's always to me like lowering a bucket down into a well and having no idea if I'm gonna hit water. And if so, when or where. You know? Am I gonna have to lower it for 10 minutes or 10 days? I have no idea. So, that part continues to mystify me. But the technical process of doing what I do is not a mystery anymore.
00:28:38	Brian	Host	The mystification goes away or the nuts and bolts of it go away, but you know—again—you've been doing this for roughly 40 years at this point. Does the imposter syndrome ever go away?
00:28:49	Danny	Guest	No. Never. I mean, I still feel like, "How am I doing this? I don't really have any—you know, right to be doing this." And you know, often I feel like an imposter, like—doing everything I do, though, I feel like an imposter. You know? When I was in middle school, I felt like an imposter just being a human being, honestly. I mean, I felt like I had to watch how other people behaved just to learn how humans behaved. And I frequently felt, as a kid, that—you know, I was placed here from some other planet and not given an instruction booklet on how to coexist with humans, and I'd just have to work it out myself. But it wasn't a natural thing for me. <i>[Chuckles.]</i> I don't really know how else to explain it. So, yeah. I mean, even being a human, I feel like an imposter half the time.
00:29:45	Brian	Guest	Yeah, I think that a lot of—there's that process of finding the other people who feel the same way, the other people who feel like the outcasts, who feel like the misfits. And I suspect that that was probably pretty foundational to the creation of The Mystic Knights.
00:30:00	Danny	Guest	Yeah. I mean, The Mystic Knights was just a radical—I don't know what they were. I mean, it was so crazy. There was like just all these crazy elements thrown together with a deep appreciation of music from the 1930s at the center of it. So, you know, it was a crazy show. I mean, we built our own ensembles of percussion. We built an entire Indonesian Gamelan out of metal pots and pans and tuned minor pans, and we built an entire ensemble of West African balafons, because me and my friend Leon, who was in the band—you know, we had balafons we brought back from West Africa, but they were too delicate to go and drag around from place to place. So, we built our own.

So, we had these whole ensembles of stuff. It was a crazy show. And then, everybody in the band had to play at least three instruments in the group. And it went from being a all-brass band to being a string band to being a percussion ensemble. And we would just do this in this weird, nutty way. But it is where I learned to develop my ear. Because my love of the '30s music—I started doing transcriptions of Cab Calloway, Duke Ellington, Django Reinhardt. I mean, this is the stuff I loved back then. And I realized at a certain point that if we're gonna do it right, I had to write it all down. So, I had to teach myself to do that. And if I hadn't done that, I never would've taken that job for *Pee-Wee's Big Adventure*.

Because there was a big beat where I was like, “I can’t do this. I don’t know what I’m doing.” And then, it’s like as I’m starting the first cue, it’s like, “Alright. How did I used to write with The Mystic Knights?”

I knew I used to have to write everything down. It had been seven years since I’d done it. ‘Cause you know, I started the band—Oingo Boingo—you don’t write anything down. It’s like when you’re in a rock band, why would you write anything? So, I hadn’t done it. I was rusty. But you know, it kind of came back to me. And so, weirdly, those early years with The Mystic Knights paved the way for me saying yes to *Pee-Wee’s Big Adventure* a decade later. “Pee-Wee’s Big Adventure (Theme)” from *Pee-Wee’s Big Adventure*.

00:32:06 Music Music

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

00:32:37 Danny Guest

Some of the skills that I really needed—namely how to write music on paper—were developed with The Mystic Knights that I never used with Oingo Boingo.

00:32:47 Brian Host

Was part of the transformation from The Mystic Knights into Oingo Boingo—was it an effort to actually make a living doing this?

00:32:56 Danny Guest

I never thought about making a living during any of those years. Originally, with The Mystic Knights, we just passed the hat. We’d just do—we’d spring up in the street in crazy places and just literally, you know, pass the hat and disappear quick before we’d get arrested. And you know, ‘cause what we were doing there was totally illegal. Like, just banging into like these performances with—and there was fire breathing. There was dangerous stuff. You know? My brother used to wear a rocket ship that had a fire extinguisher that would shoot like—you know, the rocket effect out the back. But the real reason for that was that when me and the acrobat were blowing fire, occasionally we’d start people’s sweaters on fire. *[Laughs.]*

00:33:40 Brian Host

And he would quickly position himself—spin around and put out the fire before it could—anybody—

Not only were you not making money, but you were risking a major lawsuit as well.

00:33:44 Danny Guest

Oh yeah. Every single—every night we performed, we definitely risked lawsuits in every possible way. It was crazy. And then I suddenly—because that show eventually became really ambitious, like everything I do, overreaching. And it became a show with these 12 multi-talented musicians with lots of movies, film clips, set changes, costume changes, animations that we commissioned. It became this weird multimedia thing, and it was difficult to put on. It went from that street show to being this weird multimedia thing. And suddenly, the idea of like—when I came out of that submarine and I heard ska from England, I was totally inspired. It’s like—‘cause it reminded me of the music I heard when I was 18 years old in West Africa, which was called high life. But it was like high life, but with this huge energy injection.

And that part connected with me. And suddenly, the idea of being in a band and being able to appear anywhere, anytime, on any small stage with just nothing but—you know, guitar, bass, drums, plug in

the amps, set up the drums, and bang, we're off—seemed really, really appealing to me. And I just went through a 180-degree shift from nothing contemporary to suddenly, you know, being in a rock band. And it was almost overnight. I mean, the whole transition from one to the other was probably no more than six months.

00:35:12    Music            Music

"Not My Slave" from the album *Something Wild* by Oingo Boingo.

*... whisper, "I love you"*

*With fire in your eyes, may it never go out  
The sweetness of your tears make it feel like night  
I see no escape from the roles we always play  
What do we have to prove on this judgment day?*

*You're mine now, but you're not my sister  
You're mine now, but you're not my slave  
You're mine now, but you're not my child  
You're mine now, but you're not my slave*

*You're missing the whole point, you're not my little pet  
Don't throw away your life*

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

00:35:57    Brian            Host

There are certainly ska elements in some Oingo Boingo songs. And I could point to "Not My Slave" as being like a particularly ska song, but it sounds like you effectively tapped into more of a feeling or an energy, and that carried you through the band.

00:36:12    Danny            Guest

Well, yeah. I mean, that changed. At first, it was the ska. But also, you know, it was—I mean, if I'd—I was old. I considered myself old. I was 27. So, it's like, "Alright. I can't be in a punk band because, you know, I'm old. I'm an old man. I'm an old 27-year-old. They're all 17. And—but definitely there was a punk vibe that I carried with me for the rest of my life. *[Chuckles.]* And manic energy is what I needed. So, it went from ska just to really kind of fast rock and roll of some nature. I don't really know, again, what was it. There was a number of bands that inspired me, back in that same period of the—you know, it started with Madness and The Specials and Selector. These ska bands.

But there was a band called XTC that, when I heard it, I just really loved and said, "That's great." And early Talking Heads and early Devo, you know, were also—I really loved what they were doing. But you know, the XTC particularly had an energy in a lot of their music that really appealed to me. And that Oingo Boingo in those first three/four years suddenly just became a high energy something band that no one could quite figure out what we were, because weren't pop. We definitely weren't punk. But we definitely had a lot of punk attitude, god knows.

00:37:36    Music            Music

"Private Life" from the album *Nothing to Fear* by Oingo Boingo.

*This is my private life  
I have no friends to fear  
I've got no problems, no cross to bear  
If you can find me  
Come and get me out of here*

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

00:38:08	Danny	Guest	I love confrontation. And really, even the lyrics to all of my early songs were just designed to irritate people. I mean, it was really just all about saying, you know, left wing, right wing, very—you know, a lot of political stuff. But just wanting to irritate everybody, wanting to irritate liberals, conservatives, just any group I can think of. I just wanted to aggravate and irritate them. It was almost like wanting to start an argument all the time. And that was kind of like a prime factor early on with the band, for sure.
00:38:46	Jesse	Host	Even more still to get into with Danny Elfman. Stay with us. It's <i>Bullseye</i> , from <a href="https://www.maximumfun.org">MaximumFun.org</a> and NPR.
00:38:54	Promo	Clip	[Three taps.]

**Music:** Fun, cheerful music.

**Maddy Myers:** It could happen to you. You're all grown up now, a professional adult with diverse interests and hobbies. And one of those hobbies is: video games!

**Jason Schreier:** You just can't help it. They're so good, now!

**Kirk Hamilton:** If that's you, we're here to tell you, you are completely normal.

**Maddy:** I'm Maddy Myers.

**Jason:** I'm Jason Schreier!

**Kirk:** And I'm Kirk Hamilton. And together, we form *Triple Click*, a podcast about video games.

**Maddy:** If you think you might be a person who likes video games, we hope you'll give *Triple Click* a listen.

**Kirk:** *Triple Click!* New episodes every Thursday on Maximum Fun.

00:39:30	Jesse	Host	[Music ends with three taps.] It's <i>Bullseye</i> . I'm Jesse Thorn. You're listening to Brian Heater's conversation with composer Danny Elfman.
00:39:37	Brian	Host	In the process of scoring <i>Pee-Wee's Big Adventure</i> , your first film, at what point was it clear that this is actually something that might work? That this is something that you could actually do?
00:39:48	Danny	Guest	Well, not 'til it really came out, because I expected the score was gonna get thrown out all the time I was writing it. I thought, "Okay, I'm gonna finish this score, and Warner Brothers is gonna hear it and they're gonna toss it right out and then hire a real composer to do the score. [Chuckles.] And that didn't happen. And—but you know, really the first moment where I thought, "Wow," was when I was listening to the orchestra play back my first cue with <i>Pee-Wee's Big Adventure</i> .

[Music fades in.]

00:40:25	Music	Music	I'd never been in front of an orchestra before. And that was a pretty powerful moment. It's like it was a sound. It was a big sound that I'd never really felt before. Music from <i>Pee-Wee's Big Adventure</i> .
00:40:50	Danny	Guest	[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue.] A different kind of big than being in a rock band, which was obviously loud. But this was <u>big</u> .
00:40:57	Music	Music	[Volume increases.]
00:41:12	Danny	Guest	[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.] But it was after <i>Pee-Wee</i> came out that suddenly—you know, every successful composer has a certain amount of luck involved. It's being in the right place at the right time. And you have to have an incredible amount of persistence to be around if that opportunity arrives, to be at the right place at the right time. But in this case, <i>Pee-Wee's Big Adventure</i> was the right thing at the right time. If it came out five years earlier or later, it might not have clicked. But at that moment, in the mid-'80s, when comedic film scoring was kind of in a weird place. It was neither here nor there and looking for a direction. When <i>Pee-Wee's Big Adventure</i> came out, I was offered 20 films like the next day. I mean, it was crazy. It was almost like there was a hunger for something different.
			And I just lucked out in that regard, because it just got noticed, and suddenly I was offered every quirky comedy made in Hollywood. Now, I didn't wanna be the quirky comedy guy, but on the other hand I was really happy to be getting more chances to get in front of an orchestra. 'Cause I also knew how much I didn't know. And I knew that to learn, to get the chops that I wanted, I had to do it a lot. And so, you know, back in those early days, Tim used to joke. He goes, you know, <i>Pee-Wee</i> was number one and <i>Beetlejuice</i> was number five and <i>Batman</i> was number ten and <i>Edward Scissorhands</i> was 14 or 15. And he goes, "You're doing like four films between each of my films."
			And I would say, "Unless I do that, I'm not gonna be up to your next film." Because <i>Beetlejuice</i> was more demanding than <i>Pee-Wee</i> . And <i>Batman</i> was way more demanding than <i>Beetlejuice</i> . And <i>Edward Scissorhands</i> , in its own way, was more demanding than <i>Batman</i> , just in a different way. And I was like really, really working hard to build up my chops in that period.
00:43:01	Brian	Host	So, was there a sense in which being an outsider—you know, being a—having been a rock guy, being a punk guy—was almost a secret weapon?
00:43:08	Danny	Guest	It was definitely a weapon that worked in my advantage, because being a rock guy, I attracted immediate contempt from my contemporaries. And that contempt was the best thing that could've happened to me. You know how Godzilla, when they tried to like drop a nuclear bomb on him, the radiation doesn't hurt him? You know, just makes him stronger. And that's how I was with criticism. And especially if it was really intense. The more intense it was, the more I embraced it. And so, really for like my first 10 years or 15 years of writing scores, every film I did was like—I don't know how

to say this on the radio. But it was all [censored] you, check this out. And that was how I felt.

It was like—until finally, after a decade or so, I started to get accepted. And then I had to stop—I didn't have to prove myself quite so much. But you know, coming from the other side of the fence was not well-received at that point. It's more common, now. But then—I totally understand why. Even now, when I hear of somebody going from a rock band to doing an orchestral film score, I assume they have other people doing their work for them. I assume they're not really doing it. So, it's an assumption people made about me. I do the same thing towards others! [Chuckles.] And so, I get it. You know? It's such a—it's so much more disciplined than being in a rock band and writing for a rock band, that there's just the assumption that he doesn't do it. He just—you know, hums a melody and thus other people do it, because that's very possible.

So, I get it. But in hindsight, that venom that kind of was directed towards me was just the perfect thing. It's absolutely what I needed, because it really motivated me.

00:45:04     Brian             Host

Alright, we're just about out of time, but before we go I have a special question from the *Bullseye* team. They've noticed that any time there is a crab or other sea bug on screen in a nature documentary, that the music gets a little bit weird or silly. I'm not sure if you have any special insight into that.

00:45:21     Danny             Guest

Okay, actually, I have to say I did a documentary—underwater documentary for IMAX. And we modified—actually, my first classical piece was a piece called “Serenada Schizophrana”, and we adapted that score to that documentary. And sure enough, the one character who got the really crazy piece of music wasn't a crab, but it was a shrimp. They live in these weird holes, and they pop out, and they're really aggressive. And evidently, they're—

00:45:57     Brian             Host

They live in the vents. Right?

00:45:58     Danny             Guest

Yeah, they live in the vents. And their snap—when they bite, it's like incredibly powerful. They're called—it's a manta shrimp.

00:46:07     Brian             Host

I think they like—I think they punch. I think they punch at really high speeds.

00:46:10     Danny             Guest

Yes. No, no, you're right. They hammer, and the hammer hits with the—evidently, somebody like did a test, and it's like as strong as a bullet. It's like—you know, like if it hits a piece of glass, it's hitting it like a bullet hitting a piece of glass. But this particular shrimp got the funny music. [Laughs.] It got the crazy music. So, your theory isn't completely off the mark.

[Brian laughs.]

And there is something about this shrimp similar to like perhaps a lobster or a crab. Maybe it goes for all—let's just say crustaceans and not limit it to crabs. If you're scoring crustaceans, you gotta find something that kind of feels pretty crazy. Because I think crustaceans have a way of moving and looking around and acting that is quite alien to us. I mean, let's face it, crustaceans are things from another planet. I mean, they don't seem to be connected to lifeforms that evolved on this planet. They're so [censored] weird! The way their eyes move, the way they react, the way they just—

everything about them! You know. These things are like creatures implanted here from some other place where that's what everybody looks like.

There's an album in that like I should do someday. Like, music for crustaceans. And I'll put that on my list.

00:47:45 Brian Host

[Laughs.] Danny Elfman, thank you so much for coming on *Bullseye*.

00:47:48 Danny Guest

It was really my pleasure. You know, like getting into like a long, rambling chat. I apologize that my mind wanders a lot. But it was really fun talking to you! And I hope we do it again.

00:48:01 Jesse Host

Danny Elfman! His new remix album is called *Bigger. Messier.* Thanks to our friend, Brian Heater, for interviewing Danny. His podcast is called *Recommended if You Like*. Go check it out wherever you get podcasts. If you like stuff like that interview with Danny Elfman, he's got tons more along those lines. Great guy. Great interviewer. Let's go out on one more song from Elfman's newest album, Trent Reznor's take on "Native Intelligence".

00:48:28 Music Music

"Native Intelligence" from the album *Bigger. Messier.* by Danny Elfman.

*Native intelligence, hard to find  
Animal eloquence, sometimes  
Searching for relevance online  
Here comes the eulogy*

*Trust me, children, trust me, darlin'  
Taking a bath in cyanide, taking a bath  
Taking a bath in cyanide, taking a bath  
Don't you want to play?  
Don't you want to play?  
Don't you want to play?*

00:49:23 Jesse Host

[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue.]

That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye*, created from the homes me and the staff of Maximum Fun, in and around greater Los Angeles, California. Sitting right now in my home office in Lincoln Heights, basically. And my producer, Kevin, is in his apartment in Highland Park, just a few miles down the road. And he keeps turning on his Zoom camera while he's holding his cat, Wayne, in an apparent effort to distract me.

Our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Wayne is his cat. 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 also on YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook. You can find us there and give us a follow and we will share with you all of our interviews. And that's about it. Just remember: all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

00:50:33	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.
00:50:40	Music	Music	<i>[Volume increases.]</i>  <i>To regain a fraction of a life</i> <i>Not reaction</i> <i>I dream, I dream</i>  <i>[Music fades out.]</i>