

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.
00:00:15	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.
00:00:23	Jesse Thorn	Host	It’s <i>Bullseye</i> . I’m Jesse Thorn. The Broadway musical, <i>A Strange Loop</i> , starts at intermission. The lights go down, and center stage you see an usher. A sort of classic Broadway usher—red jacket and black pants. The whole thing. He’s working intermission, but the usher is the star of the show. He’s surrounded by six figures wearing beige jumpsuits. Each person represents a different thought. Some of them have questions about the show he’s working at—a Disney musical. Others ask about the show he’s writing in his free time.
00:00:59	Music	Music	“Intermission Song” from the album <i>A Strange Loop (Original Cast Recording)</i> by Michael R. Jackson.  <i>[THOUGHTS]</i> <i>How many minutes 'til the end of intermission?</i> <i>Is that how the show should open?</i> <i>Should there even be a show?</i> <i>No, it should it start with what he's thinking</i> <i>Which is just a cursor blinking</i> <i>Cause of all of the directions</i> <i>That the narrative could go!</i>
00:01:12	Jesse	Host	<i>[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.]</i> <i>A Strange Loop</i> is a musical about writing a musical. It’s about the usher whose name also happens to be Usher and his life: his parents, his friends, his self-doubts, his aspirations. It’s also about identity. What does it mean to be a Black, gay playwright? What does it mean to write a work of art about Blackness or queerness? And for whom is that art? <i>A Strange Loop</i> explores some very big ideas in its hour and 45-minute run time, but it is also funny, approachable, and very catchy. <i>A Strange Loop</i> was honored as Best Musical and Best Book of a Musical at the most recent Tony Awards.  Our correspondent, Julie Klausner, caught the show on Broadway, and she fell in love right away. So, she sat down with Michael R. Jackson, the creator of <i>A Strange Loop</i> . Before we get into the interview, let’s hear another song from the show. This is called “Periodically”. In it, one of the thoughts is singing as a voicemail from the protagonist’s mother.
00:02:11	Music	Music	“Periodically” from the album <i>A Strange Loop (Original Cast Recording)</i> by Michael R. Jackson.  <i>[MOM]</i> <i>I just like to remind you</i> <i>Periodically</i> <i>That I love you son</i>

*If you ever should find you  
Need encouragement  
Then you call me, son  
I am your mama, and I've always loved you  
Even when you be doing me wrong*

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

00:02:40	Julie Klausner	Host	Michael R. Jackson, welcome to <i>Bullseye</i> .
00:02:43	Michael R. Jackson	Guest	Thanks for having me.
00:02:44	Julie	Host	I'm so delighted to meet you, and I am such a huge fan of yours. Thank you so much for sitting down with me, today.
00:02:49	Michael	Guest	Of course! My pleasure.
00:02:51	Julie	Host	So, I wanted to start by talking about how long it took for <i>A Strange Loop</i> to become what it is? And what kept you going over the two decades or so it took to actualize on Broadway? Was it faith? Was it some combination of stubbornness <i>[laughs]</i> —? How do you keep whatever version of optimism is necessary to keep working on something for that long?
00:03:22	Michael	Guest	Well, weirdly, I don't know that it was necessarily optimism, to be honest. It was that I had no ambition for the piece to ever get to Broadway at all. Like, period. It was just this particular story with something that I felt passionate about, and because it was—I was drawing, you know, a lot of it from my own life. And so, I was just trying to figure something out. It was almost like this mystery that I had to solve. But the mystery was like myself in a strange way? And so, I thought—especially once it started to really evolve from—it started off as a monologue, and it started to evolve into a musical later.  And so, as that happened, I thought, "Oh, maybe the most I can get out of this is like an off-Broadway production somewhere." And so, then like when that happened, that—for me, at the time—was like the zenith of whatever would happen with it. And even that wasn't something that I like had an ambition with all along. It was just like I wanted to crack this story and this character and these thoughts that—you know—he had in his mind. And so, that—doing that and also just in life, I did not have a plan B. At all. Like, that—like, it wasn't—there was nothing I had to fall back on. I was working all of these like jobs. I was ushering. I was doing anything else. And then like that—I hated that. And so, the only thing I had left was the thing that I liked, which was writing this story.
00:04:57	Julie	Host	And so, just that sustains me, itself. I just think about how I can't even read something I wrote a year ago without cringing, and for having worked on it for so long, how your relationship to your younger self changed. And your younger versions of your writing changed so that you could integrate it into a more sophisticated piece. And was that challenging?
00:05:19	Michael	Guest	You know, it was challenging! Because the form of <i>A Strange Loop</i> itself is one that's like constantly trying to refine itself. And like, so there's always more. There's always something else that can be fixed or changed or whatever, especially as me, the person and also the artist, gets older and gets more distance from it. I see more

things I'm like, "Oh! I wish—I'm not in that same space anymore. I wish I could change this part or that part or whatever." But the truth of it is, is that the musical is about someone who's 25 going on 26. I'm 41, now. So, like I'm now different. So, there are things that Usher says and does in *A Strange Loop* that I'm like, "Ohhh. Uhhhh—I wish I could change it to this or that." But I can't do that, because I have to let him as the character be where he is to have the story that he's having to get to the point that he gets to by the end.

And that's why like even though I could go in and make more changes later, I'm not gonna do that. I took, you know, 18 years to sort of really figure out that story. And at a certain point, I have to leave it be.

00:06:29 Julie Host

How did you know when you were done? How did you know to stop? Was it helpful to have collaborators to say, "Stop! It's there!"

00:06:38 Michael Guest

That was part of it, but it was also like—you know, getting to Broadway I think in many ways sort of helps, you know—I mean, I literally had to stop at a certain point, because it had to—I had to give it to the actors and let them, you know, have their show. But also, I think just because so much of the development of the piece came from my own personal development, I had to get to place where I was sort of like nothing's wrong with you, but that's what the character's story is. It's about someone trying to figure out what's wrong with them. And so, then making peace in my own life helped me sort of make peace in the art. And so, I got to a point—you know, when we got to Playwrights Horizons, I said stop.

Then we did it at Woolly Mammoth, and then I got to a certain place, and I said stop. And I was still fine tuning. Then we got to Broadway, and I was like—we got to a certain place, and I was like, "We have to stop." And it just was, you know, for good or for ill. Like this is the story.

00:07:43 Music Music

"A Sympathetic Ear" from the album *A Strange Loop (Original Cast Recording)* by Michael R. Jackson.

*[PATRON]*

*All my life, I've lived for others  
Made space for every dream except my own  
But then one day, I looked into the mirror  
And saw that I was old and all alone*

*So, my advice, don't play nice  
Don't look back and don't think twice  
Don't let doubt get in the way of what you want  
Just roll the dice  
Stay the course, seize the day  
Ride your horse into the fray  
Live your life and tell your story  
In exactly the same way.*

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

00:08:24 Julie Host

There is so much in this show that acknowledges the presence of a White audience, in the sense of the ensemble saying, "We shouldn't be talking around these White people about these things." There is

also so much—I don't know if it's as stated by the cast, but there are things in it where I was sitting there thinking, "We can't talk about this around straight people!" [Chuckles.] I wonder what your relationship is with I guess whether you hesitate about how people who would consider you as "other" perceive your work or whether you kind of enjoy exposing parts of life that are not usually visible to folks who don't see those parts of life.

00:09:15 Michael Guest

So, something that's really important to me, as an artist—and that has become like really—like super even more important in the last couple of years is the idea that I have to be free. I have to be free to express myself however I want to express myself. And what that means, particularly as a Black artist, is that I cannot, and I will not operate from a place of fear. So, that means like I have to be willing to be vulnerable artistically in front of whomever shows up and not worry so much about what are they gonna think or what are they gonna think or am I—you know—saying too much, revealing too much, whatever. Like, I have to be open.

And so, it's not that I get any sort of thrill or anything from like making people squirm or anything like that. I don't really care about that. I'm more interested in like inviting people to have authentic responses to whatever it is that they're seeing and hearing. And just not—like not giving a [censored]. You know? Like, it's just—like I know—the only thing I can come back to is I have to be free as an artist. Like, there's so much in the world that's always trying to constrain us in one way or the other. And art is the one place where you have full sort of authority. And I find that to be really powerful. You know, especially in a world that I often feel like oh god, I can't do this. I can't do that. [Singing.] "Everybody says don't. Everybody says don't. Everybody says don't, it isn't right." You know?

And so, in my writing, I'm just gonna go there. Like, wherever there is. And often, going there is a discovery for myself of like—you know, when I first set out to write *A Strange Loop*, I didn't know where it would end up. Not just in terms of where it's performed, but like the literal thematic arc of it. I didn't know that Usher would sing the song that he sings at the end or that he would say, you know, maybe my biggest problem is the pronoun "I". You know? Like, that—but that feels like meaningful. To like get to allow whatever has to happen to get that character to that place of confronting his "I".

And to do that requires a fearlessness which cannot be worried about what are White people gonna say? What are Black people gonna say? What are straight people gonna say? What are gay people gonna say? What are—you know. What—you know, they're gonna say whatever they're gonna say. And I just need to let them say it and experience it, and I'm gonna say what I need to say as well.

00:12:01 Music Music

"A Strange Loop" from the album *A Strange Loop (Original Cast Recording)* by Michael R. Jackson.

[USHER]

*Cause even with those actions*

*I'm stuck with who I am*

*Someone whose self-perception*

*Is based upon a lie  
Someone whose only problem  
Is with the pronoun "I"  
Maybe I don't need changing  
Maybe I should regroup  
Cause change is just an illusion*

*[THOUGHTS]  
Just an illusion  
Just an illusion*

*[USHER]  
And "I" is just an illusion*

*[THOUGHTS]  
Just an illusion  
Just an illusion*

*[USHER]  
If thoughts are just an illusion*

*[THOUGHTS]  
Just an illusion  
Just an illusion*

00:12:41	Jesse	Host	<i>[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue.]</i> More with Michael R. Jackson and Julie Klausner after the break. Stay with us. It's <i>Bullseye</i> , from <a href="http://MaximumFun.org">MaximumFun.org</a> and NPR.
00:12:49	Music	Music	<i>[Volume increases.]</i>
			<i>[USHER] ... strange Strange loop</i>
00:13:03	Music	Transition	<i>[Music fades out.]</i> Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.
00:13:08	Jesse	Host	It's <i>Bullseye</i> . I'm Jesse Thorn. Our guest is Michael R. Jackson. He's the creator of the Tony Award winning musical, <i>A Strange Loop</i> . He's being interviewed by our correspondent, Julie Klausner.
00:13:19	Julie	Host	I wanted to talk about Sondheim a little bit, speaking of songwriters. And I know that your favorite Sondheim show is <i>Follies</i> , is that correct?
00:13:27	Michael	Guest	It is! Although I feel like I'm constantly going back between <i>Follies</i> and then <i>Little Night Music</i> . But I think <i>Follies</i> is still the one.
00:13:34	Julie	Host	Oh, that's fascinating! Because I see <i>Follies</i> influence in <i>A Strange Loop</i> , certainly structurally. Not to mention, you know, it's got that incredible cast of interesting divas, which is I think important.
			<i>[Michael agrees.]</i>
00:13:59	Michael	Guest	I know that Steve saw the show before he died, and I wanted to know how much his opinion meant to you and whether it was a big deal to you that he saw it and whether he liked it. Yeah! So, I had won this award a couple of years ago, called the Whiting Award. And it got back to me from the people who administer that award that they were happy that he was happy that I

had won it, because I was the first musical theatre writer to get the award. It normally only goes to playwrights and poets and fiction folks and that sort of thing. And I had always been meaning to see somehow if I could get in contact with him to thank him for saying that, but I wasn't at the time. And this is like way pre-pandemic. And then, he came and saw the show and I was there the night he saw it. And I was like—

00:14:39 Julie Host  
00:14:40 Michael Guest

The Broadway version?  
The Off-Broadway version. And I was there the night that he saw the show. And I was like kind of looking over to like, "What is—like what is saying?" You only can see so much. And then he sort of skedaddled like right as it ended, 'cause he tends to do that. Like, he—'cause he doesn't wanna get caught up in the crowd. And he was like quite old, even then. And then, the pandemic hit. And I had always heard over the years—everybody I knew in the theatre world was always like, "Here's my letter to Sondheim! Well, here's my letter to Sondheim! And here's mine!" And I never had written him. And I got his like contact information and I said, "I'm just gonna email him."

So, I emailed him to say thank you. I'd heard about comments you had said about me having won that award. And then also, thank you for coming to see the show. And then, he wrote back like a week later being like he saw the show, he loved it. And he was looking forward to whatever I was doing next. And he said he thought he had seen me in the lobby—'cause I did run down, but I was too afraid to like really run after him and his partner. Anyway. It did mean a lot for me—a lot to me that he saw the show and that he liked it, just because I had such a deep respect for him as a dramatist.

And I don't count him as a musical influence, but I do count him as an influence in the sense that he approaches songwriting like its playwrighting. And that's something that I deeply admire about him, that he's such a puzzle master and that he like is always sort of focused on like what does the character want? And like, how do they start in one place and end in a different place by the end of the song? And what's sort of the dramatic function? And that's—I think that's a lesson that I will carry with me in everything that I do. Of like trying to approach the songs as like little micro stories. Because that's the integrity that I want the musicals I write to have, that you can—that you could like almost take the story out of it and still follow the journey of the character through the songs.

00:16:46 Julie Host

Right, listen to the original Broadway cast recording and get a sense of the show.

00:16:51 Michael Guest

Yeah. Like, if you were to listen *A Strange Loop* outside of seeing it, there will be things that you would miss, but I think you would still get like—you know—a beginning, middle, and end to a character's journey.

00:17:05 Julie Host

I wonder if his mind was blown at all to sit in an audience and hear songs about like, uh, your White, gay, Dan Savagery and the stuff about Scott Rudin and being like, "Wait, you could do a show about that?!"

00:17:16 Michael Guest

Well, Scott Rudin sat in the audience and listened to that, too. [Laughs.] So.

00:17:20 Julie Host Oh, god, amazing. Amazing. But I just think of Sondheim thinking that like a musical about a pointillist painter is like too niche, and no one's gonna be able to connect to it. And I wonder with him as like a gay man, seeing someone living their truth so authentically and fearlessly. And I wonder if having been from the generation he was and knowing his attitudes towards theatre, like if he was like, "Wait, if I could've done this, I could've done so much more!" *[Laughs.]*

00:17:50 Michael Guest No, I wonder. I mean, because he—they weren't exactly shrinking violets back in the '50s and '60s, either. I mean, certainly like something like *A Strange Loop* would not have happened in the '50s or '60s, but people were formally trying all kinds of stuff like back then. Like, to me, I find every time I watch *Gypsy* and Mama Rose goes, *[whisper screaming]* "A glooove!" I like—I find that moment to be genuinely shocking because of what it's sort of implying, and like this mother is literally like trying to get her daughter to like strip, but like treating it like it's vaudeville in a strip house. And so, like I—

00:18:29 Julie Host Well, you know the stuff with the mom in *A Strange Loop* he was like, "Yes!"

00:18:32 Michael Guest Yeah! Oh yeah, 'cause he has his mother thing. So, I like to imagine that he maybe felt like, you know, it was a part of a tradition, which I very much feel—you know—connected to the tradition in musical theatre, for all its problems in the sort of producing of it, but the form—I just feel very much a part of and proud to be a part of that tradition.

00:18:59 Julie Host I completely agree. I saw so much of Sondheim in this show, and *Sunday in the Park* particularly. Just as far as an artist getting to—

00:19:06 Michael Guest And *Company* was a huge touchstone for me.

00:19:08 Julie Host Really?

00:19:09 Michael Guest Yeah. Because it's about this like singular figure with all of these—

00:19:14 Julie Host Well, the Bobby Baby and the usher, Usher. Yeah.

00:19:16 Michael Guest Usher, Usher. But like also, just like this guy and all his narrated friends, their voices in his head like that was like a huge touchstone for me, working on the show over the years.

00:19:25 Julie Host Well, I'm sure he connected to it very personally and deeply and I just think about him in a different time and sort of seeing what he gave birth to and feeling a tremendous sense of pride. 'Cause I absolutely think that you're on the same level.

00:19:40 Michael Guest Oh, thank you. That's so kind. That's—I'm honored.

00:19:43 Julie Host One of the things that made *A Strange Loop* so incredible when I first saw it is I was amazed by how you were able to turn things that were so specific into universal notions. And I'm sitting there crying in the dark even though I'm not a Black, gay man, completely relating to this lead character—not just because of compassion, but because we can all relate to being outsiders.

*[Michael agrees.]*

And I guess how do you keep the audience in mind or do you even need to when you're writing about these experiences that are so specific to—maybe not everyone can relate to this, you know, sexual experience, but we've all felt shame after something that we've been degraded by.

00:20:29 Michael Guest Yeah. Well, I think that that's—it's just that. You know? The thing I sort of decided early on when we started doing this show at Playwrights was that I wanted invite everyone in to meet the piece

wherever they were. That like I trusted that the audience would decide for themselves how they felt about anything. And also, it is true! Like, the song “Boundaries” is one where, yes, not everybody’s had the experience that Usher had that preceded it, but everybody’s had a moment of going, “Why did I do that?” A moment of regrets about something. It could be something that you said or something that you didn’t say or something that you did, or you hurt someone or some—you know, or you didn’t tell someone you loved them or whatever it is.

And I sort of wanted to refract that through the specificity of, you know, this character going through what he was going through, but like with the understanding that the audience is a collaborator. And so, I do think about the audience. I don’t pander to the audience, but I do—they’re at least half the reason why we’re there. And so, I can’t ignore them. I need to like—I wanna create the conditions for them to engage as much as possible. In this case, I needed the audience to dive deeper and deeper into Usher as he dives deeper and deeper into himself. And the deeper and deeper they dive into him, the deeper they dive into themselves.

And that’s why I always tell people when I’m asked what do I want the audience to walk away with, I want them to walk away thinking about themselves. Also, other people, but like the idea of like a shared humanity to me is a really powerful thing that theatre can do. And certainly, in this day and age, I think the idea of a shared humanity is very needed. And so, I feel excited when lots of different people say, “Oh, this isn’t my experience, but I related to it.” And it’s very funny, too. You know, thinking about White audience members. I’ve had so many White people like come rushing up to me being like, [*too intensely*] “I know this isn’t my story! I know it isn’t! I know! I know it isn’t! I want you to know I know it’s not for me, but I really liked it!”

And I’m like, “Well, how do you know that it’s not for you?” I mean, it’s for you if you felt something. Do you know what I mean? And that’s a hard thing in the world today, because everything has to be so—literally—black and white and so binary. And this like who is this for and who is it not for. Like, by that logic, I couldn’t be attracted to Tori, Liz, and Joni, because that’s not for me. That’s not for me! Like, those—a lot of the experiences that those ladies sing about weren’t my experience. But the feeling was the same. And that’s what I find so beautiful about art and what’s so powerful about it is that you can literally sort of reach across a divide and like find a common emotionality and a common something. And I think that’s very, very important and that we should not lose sight of it in this like zeal to assign everybody, you know, their—

00:23:51	Julie	Host	Their lane.
00:23:52	Michael	Guest	Their lane that they’re in. Yeah.
00:23:53	Julie	Host	And I wonder if that connects to what you were saying earlier about using this work to sort of heal yourself and come to a place where you didn’t hate yourself anymore, if feeling connected to a common humanity helped in that way as well.
00:24:08	Michael	Guest	Yeah! I think so! Because you know, I started writing the show as a monologue from a place of pure isolation. So, like in a way, this thing that started off as—I felt so alone. So misunderstood. So

00:24:54	Crosstalk	Crosstalk	<p>unheard. Just in my own little vacuum of self. And in working on the piece, I got to connect with so many people. And that's like, you know, <i>[singing]</i> "Somebody hold me too close, somebody hurt me too deep. Somebody sit in my chair and ruin my sleep and make me aware of being aliiiiive!" You know? Like, I wanted to—I didn't wanna feel so alone. 'Cause alone is alone—  <b>Julie &amp; Michael:</b> Not alive.</p>
00:24:58	Julie	Host	<p><b>Michael:</b> You know?  I have a question that's very specific to the show, which hopefully everyone will get a chance to experience either live or through the original cast recording or hopefully it'll be filmed. You've six actors onstage who play Usher's thoughts.</p> <p><i>[Michael confirms.]</i></p> <p>And I wonder what goes into not just casting them, but how you direct them in terms of sticking to their introductory lines of who they are and kind of keeping them on track. Like, is there a reason thought number one is going to play this character? Or thought number three is gonna play that one?</p>
00:25:31	Michael	Guest	<p>So, a lot of that came very organically, because of the six folks who play the thoughts, most of them have been a part of the development for a very long time. John-Andrew Morrison, who sings "Periodically", has been singing that song since 2008. And so, everybody in the room over the years I'm working on it really sort of developed their thought in a way. Like, we moved some folks around a little bit, and we divided some tracks up and reassigned some tracks as we saw like what we were trying to build, overall. But like, a lot of that came from just sort of the relationships that were formed in the room with the people and like with those actors and like it just became very clear who should do what, especially as I was like going, "Oh, I need this scene—" Well, I always call it the reality show scene is what I call it when the family's just like going crazy in the living room.</p> <p>And I was like, oh, it's like very clear that like James should be the mother in that scene, in part because of just his natural instrument. And like, oh, and then we need—you know, Antwayn to be the dad. Like, it just—and like just moving those pieces around to see—to play into everybody's strengths. You know?</p>
00:26:58	Music	Music	<p><i>[Music fades in.]</i></p> <p>And so, it was a real organic process.  "We Wanna Know" from the album <i>A Strange Loop (Original Cast Recording)</i> by Michael R. Jackson.</p> <p><i>[CHORUS]</i>  <i>We wanna know</i>  <i>What's going on in New York</i>  <i>We wanna know</i>  <i>What's going on in your life</i></p> <p><i>With people, they live in any which-a-way</i>  <i>And to heck with what the B-I-B-L-E say</i></p>

*We wanna know  
What's going on in New York*

00:27:27 Jesse Host *[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue.]*  
We'll wrap up with Michael R. Jackson in just a minute. His musical, *A Strange Loop*, has moments of autobiography, characters based on people in his own life. And when we come back, we'll talk about what it was like showing the play to his family. It's *Bullseye*, from [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and NPR.

00:27:44 Music Music *[Volume increases.]*

*[CHORUS]*  
*It appears you just be running around  
Without any direction  
Without any direction  
Without any direction*

*If that's what you really wanted to do  
Then why don't you just stay here?*

*[THOUGHT, spoken]*  
*Cause you're selfish!*

*[CHORUS]*  
*Every time we call you up you just claim*

00:28:02 Promo Clip *[Music fades out.]*  
**Music:** Exciting, upbeat piano.

**J. Keith van Straaten:** Most gameshows quiz contestants about topics they don't even care about.

**Helen Hong:** But for 100 episodes, the *Go Fact Yourself* podcast has asked celebrity guests trivia about topics they choose for themselves.

**J. Keith:** And introduced them to some of their personal heroes along the way.

**Speaker 1:** Oh my gosh!

**Speaker 2:** Shut up! *[Laughs.]*

**Speaker 3:** Oh! I feel like I'm gonna cry!

**Speaker 4:** Oh, my sta-a-a-rs!

**Speaker 5:** I'm so—I'm so excited to meet you.

**J. Keith:** Join me, J. Keith van Straaten.

**Helen:** And me! Helen Hong! Along with guests like DJ Jazzy Jeff, Yardley Smith, Roxane Gay, and so many more On the trivia gameshow podcast *Go Fact Yourself*.

**J. Keith:** Twice a month every month, on Maximum Fun.

*[Music ends.]*

00:28:45	Music	Transition	Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.
00:28:49	Jesse	Host	Welcome back to <i>Bullseye</i> . I'm Jesse Thorn. If you're just joining us, our guest is Michael R. Jackson. He's the creator of the Broadway musical <i>A Strange Loop</i> . <i>A Strange Loop</i> is a show about writing, artistry, and identity. The show's main character is a theatre usher who moonlights as a playwright. He interacts with a chorus of characters who represent his inner dialogue. The show won the award for Best Musical at the most recent Tony Awards.
00:29:21	Julie	Host	Interviewing him is our correspondent, Julie Klausner. Let's get back into their conversation. I know Terry Gross asked you about how much this show's based on real things your parents have said and what your relationship is with your folks, in terms of the show, so she already got the scoop. But my question is sort of where you got the balance to be free enough to write about your family honestly, knowing that you still wanted them in your life? And write about them in a way that was truthful without worrying about what your family would think?
00:29:52	Michael	Guest	So, the answer to that is sort of dual. There's a duality to my response to that, because on one level I didn't worry about my family's response to it, because I think of it all as sort of fictional. Because like in order to write it, I did actually have to make some things up in addition to whatever things might—you know—correspond to my own life. But then on the other side, I was nervous about my parents to see it, because my parents are not really theatre people at all. And so, I was just—I was sort of worried about whether they would understand it, just as a anything. 'Cause they don't go to the theatre like that. And it wasn't like I was writing <i>Hello, Dolly</i> . You know?
00:30:59	Julie	Host	And so, I just thought they might be like, "What is this?" And so, the balance just sort of came from me deciding to just be fearless. Like, at the end of the day, that always was sort of the answer. Like, if I was afraid to do it, that meant that I needed to do it.
00:31:00	Michael	Guest	Really? Yeah. And so, I did that like the whole time. And that's sort of how I had to approach everything, because otherwise it's very easy for me to get caught up in the thoughts in my head saying, <i>[singing]</i> "Everybody says don't. Everybody says don't. Every say don't." Right? You know? And so, I had to just like be fearless and just say—and go for it. Because I was, at the end of the day, just trying to get to the end of the story. And so, I was afraid, and I wasn't afraid, but for different reasons.
00:31:27	Julie	Host	I wanted to know how your love of soap operas impacts your life as a writer and as a creative person.
00:31:34	Michael	Guest	Well! I mean, sort of in the biggest way is that I have like a life—like, I love story. Like, I love characters. I love people who do contradictory things. I love sort of <i>[singing a suspenseful stinger]</i> dun-dun-duuuun! I love all of that. On the other hand, like my next musical is literally sort of drawn from my love of soap operas and Lifetime movies and melodrama. It's a musical called <i>White Girl in Danger</i> . And it sort of is exploring this idea of representation or, you know, sort of what we mean or what are the implications of this

thing that we call equity, diversity, and inclusion. It has some meta elements, similar to *A Strange Loop* in a way.

But it's an even deeper sort of weirder thing, because it's set in a made-up soap opera town that I made called Allwhite. And in Allwhite, there are two races and classes of people. And one of them are the Allwhites, who have like fantastic stories beyond their wildest dreams. And then you have the sort of Blackground characters who have slavery and police violence. And that's what they get, and they just repeat those over and over and over again. Until one of them is like, "I want in on these Allwhite stories." And so, he sort of wanders. He's sort of granted access to the Allwhite world, and then suddenly he starts to usurp storylines and be like, you know—I grew up watching *Days of Our Lives*, and Sami Brady was like—from the moment she walked into our lives in Salem, in 1993, she like had a plan.

00:33:24	Julie	Host	Is that your favorite?
00:33:25	Michael	Guest	It was the one I grew up on. My favorite was <i>Another World</i> until it was canceled. And then it was sort of like—then I fell deeply in love with <i>One Life to Live</i> , but also <i>Guiding Light</i> . I mean, I watched all of them for like such a—
00:33:38	Julie	Host	Did you watch with your mom? Did you watch alone?
00:33:39	Michael	Guest	I watched with my great aunt when I was a little-little kid, and then as I got older, I would watch on like days off and half days. And then I started to record on VHS when I was at school, and I would watch them when I got home, while I was doing my homework. And then, like I got to college, and I was scheduling my classes around them, but also still recording. And I just got like deeply, deeply, deeply into them over many years.
00:34:03	Julie	Host	Did you like things about soap operas? Like <i>Tootsie</i> or <i>Soap Dish</i> ?
00:03:08	Michael	Guest	I love <i>Soap Dish</i> so, so, so, so, so much. I love <i>Tootsie</i> too, but I don't think I saw that until much later. I think what I love most about soaps is that they're worlds without end, and that the story just continues to play out and repeat and be told again with different people and different characters and different—and today, the role of so-and-so is played by another actor! And that's a whole other story! There's something about like the mortality of like—of thinking about life as sort of going on forever and ever like is sort of magical to me. And then, in terms of <i>White Girl in Danger</i> itself, especially in the last couple of years as it feels to me like life has become a soap opera, there was something about that that I had—that I needed to—that I need to express in this show about what life has felt like inside of this sort of soap opera where—
00:35:13	Julie	Host	Crazy town.
00:35:14	Michael	Guest	Crazy town of like crazy politics and—but every, I think—but also, like in my own life. Like, watching people in my world, friends, people who like lose their minds—watching me lose my mind. Like one—and then, and that—
00:35:29	Julie	Host	And getting a Tony!
00:35:30	Michael	Guest	What are you talking about? Like, and then some days I would feel like—during the pandemic, I would feel like I was a villain. And some days I would feel like I was a victim. And like just going back and forth. And that's something that happens on soap operas all the time. One day, you know, Kristen DiMera as played by Eileen Davidson is like the good girl who moved to Salem and was trying to sort of get away from like her evil, you know, stepfather or foster

father, Stefano DiMera. And then one day, she crossed over to the dark side and then she became the bad girl! Who like, you know, locked Dr. Marlena Evans up in a secret room in the basement.

And like—and there’s something about that—that those stories can have that kind of broad sweep that weirdly feels like a metaphor for life, sometimes. Even if, obviously, I’m not locking anybody up in the basement, but sometimes it feels like I’m locking somebody up in the basement.

00:36:26 Julie Host And I just wanted to know, finally, what you are watching right now and what is inspiring you or what’s just sort of what you’re enjoying?  
00:36:37 Michael Guest So, I have mostly been watching old things. So, during lockdown, I got really into *Murder, She Wrote*, which I never had seen it before.

[Julie reacts with surprise.]

I started watching it during the lockdown, because it was something my mom always liked, but I never watched it. And I started watching it, and I’ve gotten a little busy, but I basically would watch it every night before bed. Because it’s—every episode is self-contained, and just the guest stars on that show are just beyond.

00:37:10 Julie Host Heavenly.  
00:37:11 Michael Guest [In a Boston accent.] They’re bey-ond. They’re like butter. You know?

And I—there’s something about that storytelling that sort of ties in a little bit with my love of soap storytelling, in that like it’s just—it goes on and on and on. And you get to just like live with Jessica Fletcher doing the same thing every episode. And there’s something very comforting about that. So, then when I came out of that, um—

00:37:33 Julie Host And by the way, when you finish, there’s always *Columbo*.  
00:37:35 Michael Guest I’ve heard that *Columbo* is a similar experience with Peter Falk.  
00:37:39 Julie Host And you’ve got your [inaudible] connection.  
00:37:40 Michael Guest And I’ve got a—yeah, yeah, with Peter Falk.  
00:37:42 Julie Host So, you’ve got plenty of guest stars too to dig into.  
00:37:44 Michael Guest But also, I started watching—although I fell off. I need to get back to it—is *Cagney & Laci*. And I also really wanna see *The Love Boat*. But it’s not like available. It’s not easy to find.

00:37:56 Julie Host You don’t have cable? ‘Cause it’s always on that one channel.  
00:37:57 Michael Guest I don’t have cable. No, I don’t have cable anymore. I only have Verizon Fios, but like—and then like as a far as like new stuff, I like watch *White Lotus*, which I liked a lot. But I tend to like not like most new things. It’s like becoming a problem for me.

[Music fades in.]

00:38:13 Julie Host Michael R. Jackson, what a pleasure. Thank you so much for sitting down with me, and I wish you nothing but good things. I can’t wait to see what’s next.

00:38:19 Michael Guest Oh, thank you, Julia. It was a pleasure to speak with you.

00:38:21 Music Transition Thumpy, chiming synth.

00:38:25 Jesse Host Michael R. Jackson, interviewed by Julie Klausner. *A Strange Loop* is playing at the Lyceum Theatre on Broadway right now. Tickets are available. Our thanks very much to our pal and correspondent Julie Klausner for conducting the interview. She is one of the hosts of the very funny podcast *Double Threat*. She’s also a writer. You

00:38:53 00:39:09	Music Jesse	Transition Host	<p>can see her work in the new <i>Kids in the Hall</i> reboot and on the musical TV comedy <i>Schmigadoon!</i>.  Bright piano with a steady beat.  So. That's the end of another episode of <i>Bullseye</i>. <i>Bullseye</i>, created from the homes me and the staff of Maximum Fun, in and around greater Los Angeles, California. My home, a little more empty this week.</p>
			<p>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 DJW, also known as Dan Wally. Our theme song is called "Huddle Formation", written and recorded by The Go! Team. Thanks to them and Memphis Industries, their label, for providing it to us.</p>
00:40:05	Promo	Promo	<p><i>Bullseye</i> 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 that you may share them with others. I think that's about it. Just remember: all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.  <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.</p>
			<p><i>[Music fades out.]</i></p>