

00:00:00	Music	Transition	Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.
00:00:01	Promo	Promo	Speaker: <i>Bullseye with Jesse Thorn</i> is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.
00:00:13	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. James Acaster is a standup comic from London. He’s appeared on a bunch of TV shows over there: <i>Mock of the Week</i> , <i>Taskmaster</i> , <i>Hypothetical</i> , lots of others. On stage, he’s observational, a little absurd, and also animated but cutting. Maybe you saw the clip of him on social media recently where he calls out transphobia and the kind of comedians who call themselves edgy.
00:00:47	Sound Effect	Transition	Music swells and fades.
00:00:48	Clip	Clip	<i>[The audience laughs regularly.]</i>
			James Acaster: And I understand your concern. Most edgy comics look like me, race and gender-wise. They say whatever they like. Edgy comedians? No one tells them what they can and can’t say! They walk straight on stage, top of their specials sometimes, do ten solid minutes just slagging off transgender people. Just straight out the gate, just making fun of transgender people. If people on the internet get upset about it, the comedian’s always like, <i>[smugly]</i> “BAD LUCK! That’s my job! I’m a standup comedian! I’m meant to challenge people! If you don’t like being challenged, don’t watch my shows! What’s the matter, guys?! Too challenging for you!?”
00:01:19	Sound Effect	Transition	Music swells and fades.
00:01:20	Jesse	Host	That’s from his most recent special, <i>Cold Lasagna Hate Myself 1999</i> . Acaster is also prolific. This past month, he released <i>James Acaster’s Guide to Quitting Social Media</i> , a self-help book about—I mean, you can figure out what it’s about. It’s his third book. Like I said, he’s prolific. When I talked with James Acaster, it was 2018. He’d just released his first Netflix special, called <i>James Acaster: Repertoire</i> . It’s four hour-long live specials. It’s really, really funny. Here’s a bit from it.
00:01:56	Sound Effect	Transition	Music swells and fades.
00:01:58	Clip	Clip	<i>[The audience laughs regularly.]</i>
			James: I don’t get hammered on my own, by the way. I don’t get trashed. I just get tipsy. Tipsy is the best thing you can be in life, is tipsy. There’s four things you can be in life: sober, tipsy, drunk, hungover. Tipsy’s the only one out of the four where you don’t cry during it. Should’ve warned you earlier, some of the jokes are sad. Gotta choose your soft drink when you’re getting tipsy—make sure every other drinks are soft drinks. Sustain it, maintain it. I’m a Dr. Pepper man. I love Dr. Pepper. I don’t claim to understand it—I’m not that arrogant; of course not. What an enigma that drink is! I drink it every night. I could not tell you what flavor it is. No idea! I’ve had my mouth full of Dr. Pepper and all my other senses shut off. I’ll

be like, “It tastes like a sexy battery. Are you happy?! It tastes like a sexy battery.”

00:02:51 Sound Effect Transition Music swells and fades.

00:02:52 Jesse Host James Acaster, welcome to *Bullseye*. It’s great to have you on the show.

00:02:55 James Acaster Guest Thank you so much for having me!

00:02:56 Jesse Host Can I tell you—I feel like that Dr. Pepper humor is something that would play distinctly differently in America and in the UK.

00:03:03 James Guest Yeah! I’d say so! I think—so, like last year I came to the US for the first time to do some shows, and I was getting ready to film the show that that clip’s from, and that Dr. Pepper routine—alright, so I originally did it in a show four years ago and then just didn’t do it for ages and resurrected it for this. And it did better in the UK than it used to, ‘cause more people drink Dr. Pepper now. But it did a lot better over here, where a lot of people—you know, that it’s been a part of the culture for a very long time—a rich part of the culture.

00:03:38 Jesse Host I feel like maybe Americans going to see a British standup, they’re just sitting there, and they got 20 minutes of like hard work.

[James agrees and laughs.]

So, like they’re sitting there and they’re like, “Okay, I’m putting the pieces together. I’m listening carefully. I gotta understand a different accent. I gotta—” Occasionally they might say “lorry”. And then they get to a Dr. Pepper thing, it’s like, “Oh, I’m home free, baby! Dr. Pepper humor?! Yeah, sure!”

00:03:59 James Guest That’s when the tweets start rolling in, and I’m gonna get all of the happy tweets.

[Jesse laughs.]

There’s a thing in one of the shows where I talk about lollypop men and lollypop women, back in the UK. And you don’t have those here. You have crossing guards here. So, like that’s what they are. And—

00:04:17 Jesse Host *[Laughing.]* I was like, “Does a lollypop mean—?” I was literally sitting there thinking like, “Is a lollypop—is that what—is that what a popsicle is called in the UK?” I’m like trying to put the pieces together.

00:04:28 James Guest Yeah, exactly. It very confusing for people here, I don’t know, to google it and find out, oh, it’s a crossing guard.

00:04:33 Jesse Host When you started doing comedy, were you trying to be—I mean, I don’t know what the British equivalent is, but were you trying to be a classic, Jay Leno, Jerry Seinfeld observational comedian? And like keep it light, relate to everyone?

00:04:46 James Guest I think I discovered the stories that worked the best were the ones that honed in on small, little details. And it was me getting obsessed with something tiny and going over and over it. There’s this one story—it was the first story I had that worked, and it was about me holding a grudge against the ticket man at Kettering Train Station, in England, and how like—how much I hated this man. I didn’t realize that the reason the routine works so well is because it was a long routine that was me focused on this tiny little detail about this guy and really taking offense to it. And what I thought—I thought the

routine worked 'cause it was about a kind of flaw in my personality and showing me in a bad light, that I was bearing all these grudges for no reason.

So, I wrote loads of routines about what a scumbag I was. And none of them worked at all. It was like—you know, just all the negative things about me and all the things I was ashamed of. And none of those worked, and then I kind of had to go right back to square one again and go, "Okay, it wasn't that. So, what was it?" And then, eventually, you figure out that it was the minutiae stuff. I would've just thought that it was train stuff.

00:05:43 Jesse Host
00:05:46 James Guest

Yeah, yeah. I could've—I could've very easily become the train comic.

[Jesse laughs.]

00:05:52 Jesse Host

And just been doing that, the like mid-level train gags. I feel like in the UK, there's a lot of room there for train comedy, especially.

00:05:56 James Guest
00:05:57 Jesse Host

Well, I mean, I think—

Here, we don't have a national rail service—you know, and Amtrak doesn't have the right of way, so they have to wait for freight trains. So, it's very difficult to—and I feel like in the UK...

00:06:07 James Guest

Well, yeah, but that's thing is that we've all got train stories. So, what—especially when you're coming up, every comic has a routine that involves the trains, because that's our lives. And so, I think early on I was like, "I can't be a comic who's—all of my routines are about trains, hotels, and gigs that I've done." 'Cause then it's all just about the lifestyle of a comic.

00:06:28 Jesse Host

Right, I mean, it's like the classic cliched American comedian material is airplane food. You know.

00:06:34 James Guest

Sure! Yeah. It's 'cause they're always getting in airplanes! You know? So, like you kind of write about what you know and what's going on with you. *[Chuckles.]* Unless you start lying in your specials and say you're an undercover cop, but what idiot would do that?

[Jesse cackles.]

00:06:49 Jesse Host

What idiot would do that?

When you started standup comedy, you had been in a couple of bands. Were you in those bands thinking that you were going to become a real life, fulltime, professional musician?

00:07:01 James Guest

I thought I was gonna become one of the most influential musicians of all time. That is what I genuinely believed. And yeah, embarrassing to say that now. But at the time, I thought—I didn't necessarily think that that would happen, but I wanted that to happen. That's what the aim was, was to do this band, sound like nobody else has ever sounded, influence all who come after us, and that was kind of the aim. I was like—you know, late teens. I think at that age, if you're in a band, that's how you've gotta feel about it.

If you're 17 and in a band and your main thing is "how do we get a record deal and how are we gonna get voted to the top of the charts and sell loads of records", then you've—that's too early to kind of

00:07:47 Jesse Host like resign yourself to that sort of cynicism when it comes to creating stuff. And I think—
00:07:48 James Guest Or if you're just in a Beatles cover band.
00:07:49 Jesse Host Yeah, or something like that. Yeah.
00:07:50 James Guest Weddings and—yeah.
Yeah, well there's a guy who like—you know, my—I was in a band with one other guy. It was me and my friend Graham, and that was the whole band. And his plumber was in a covers band.

[Jesse laughs.]

00:08:07 Jesse Host And when we were gonna—when we decided we were stopping the band, we were—I was 22 at this point.
By the way, I just wanna be clear, I'm not laughing at the prospect of a plumber being in the band. I'm laughing at the prospect of your friend having a plumber.

[James agrees with a laugh.]

00:08:17 James Guest Like he's got—like, "Oh, I got a guy." You know, you've got a guy.
00:08:18 Jesse Host Yeah, yeah, yeah. Well, basically, his house—
00:08:19 James Guest "Very musical."
His house needed so much plumbing, this guy was there all the time. Like, he was always there.

[Jesse laughs.]

And they would talk about music, and Graham was like, "Yeah, we're writing these songs."

And this guy was like, "Yeah, well, I'm learning other people's songs." And he never really understood—'cause obviously his covers band was playing to loads more people than us, so getting booked for proper gigs where they were getting paid and doing functions and stuff. And we were just going around the country not getting paid for gigs, playing to hardly anyone, and writing our own music. And he was always like, "I don't get why you're doing this. Like, it's so much easier doing what I'm doing. Why aren't you doing this?"

And we'd always be like, "Cause we wanna make a difference and an impact!"

And he was like, "Yeah, but no one does that! You're not gonna do that! No one ever does that."

00:09:09 Jesse Host And when we decided to split up, we also decided to record all of our songs, even though we were not continuing to be in a band anymore. And we were gonna go into a proper recording studio for a month and record—
00:09:11 James Guest And just memorialize your failure.
Yeah! And just like—we—and we did it! We slept on the floor for a month in the studio, and we recorded 17 songs. The album's over an hour long. And this guy was going, "I don't understand why you're doing this." And we were like, "We just really wanna do it. We don't wanna forget these songs."

He was like, “I don’t understand.”

And I think one day we just lost our temper with him and like, “Well, if you wrote your own songs, maybe you’d understand!” And like really kind of like angrily at him. But it was—it’s—a lot of passion went into the whole thing. It was uncompromising. And I listen to it now, and I can see plenty of reasons why it did not do what we wanted it to do. But I’m glad that I was in something where we just didn’t listen to anyone else and just did whatever we wanted. I think that’s important.

00:09:53 Jesse Host I mean, were you making music that people would have liked—potentially liked to have bought and/or enjoyed? Like, music that leads—the kind of music that leads to a professional music career?

00:10:07 James Guest I think it was—potentially it could’ve been. But like, it would’ve taken us a long time to really—we needed a proper singer who could sing.

[Jesse agrees with amusement.]

00:10:17 Jesse Host And we didn’t have that. And so, we had to—
Right. So, that’s a big challenge.

00:10:19 James Guest It’s a huge thing.

00:10:20 Jesse Host If you don’t have a—I mean, it’s hard to hit the charts... without...

00:10:24 James Guest *[Laughs.]* Yeah, yeah, yeah! I mean, we basically both learnt to sing for the project. And we couldn’t—I definitely couldn’t sing. My singing teacher on the first lesson told me that she couldn’t teach me. That it was gonna be impossible.

00:10:37 Jesse Host *[Chortles in delight and struggles for words.]* That’s—

00:10:39 James Guest I mean, you know. And also, we didn’t write—you know—one vocal melody for the song and both sing it and stuff like that. We both wrote our separate vocal lines for the song and just sang them at the same time. So, like, we were both singing two lead parts over the top of one another for most of the songs. And it wasn’t like we were doing a call and response or anything. It was just two separate songs that we were that we were both singing over these tracks.

00:11:06 Jesse Host Even more still to get into with James Acaster. Stay with us. It’s *Bullseye*, from [MaximumFun.org](https://www.maximumfun.org) and NPR.

00:11:14 Music Transition Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

00:11:18 Jesse Host Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I’m Jesse Thorn. If you’re just joining us, my guest is James Acaster. He’s a standup comic from London. He starred in the 2021 special *Cold Lasagna Hate Myself 1999*. He’s also the author of three books, including the brand-new *James Acaster’s Guide to Quitting Social Media*.

When he and I talked in 2018, he’d just released his special, *Repertoire*, which is four hour long. Four separate hours, but still. Four hours! Let’s get back into our conversation.

00:12:00 James Guest I read somewhere—and I couldn’t quite tell if it was a joke, but I read somewhere that you decided to skydive and do standup.

00:12:03 Jesse Host Yeah! Well, so, that was like when I—

00:12:04 James Guest I mean, not at the same time.

00:12:04 James Guest Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. That was when I did my first ever gig. So, like, my first ever gig was when I was 21, so still in the band. But I’d had a car crash, and I got really scared of dying and really obsessed with dying for a long time. And so, I did a bunch of

things that were like on a sort of bucket list of like I wanna experience this. And one was a skydive. I did that. And then one was try standup comedy. And I did a gig and then I kind of did a gig once every like four months just for fun.

00:12:35 Jesse Host
00:12:38 James Guest

What were the circumstances of the car crash?

That one was I'd just passed my test, and then eight days later, I was driving home late at night on some back roads, like some little, twisty, country roads. And went round the corner too fast in the dark. There was mud all over the road, which I was not aware of. And I just skidded. Went off the road and like just could've pinballed against the hedge and the floor for a while. Stopped. And then tried to drive home still, but what happened was I went into the road, the engine died, and then I was just sitting there. And then a car was coming really fast towards me, and a car was coming really fast behind me. And they both saw me at the last minute and tried to overtake me on the same side and hit into each other and went into a ditch. And then they both got out.

And everyone was fine, but I got—there was a point where my car was balancing on the two wheels on the right, and it was like balancing and teetering. And it was either gonna go on its roof, in which case—'cause I wasn't going fast enough; it wouldn't roll, and it was just gonna smash and would probably break my neck. Or it was gonna go onto the four wheels. And it went onto four wheels, but I think like—I had like a day of being really proud. I've had this crash and telling everyone about it like I was cool. And then, I remember it snowed that day. I was at college, and it snowed. I remember going to my friend, Graham's, car—the same Graham that I was in a band with—and I slipped while walking down a hill and landed on my back really hard. And I remember people laughing at me. And I was like, yeeah, it's pretty funny.

And then, I went to the car with Graham, and he hadn't—he'd left his lights on all day, so the battery was dead. So, we had to call the services to come out and start it again. And we were there for an hour laughing at like how unfortunate that was. And then he got me home. And my family'd gone out for the evening, and it was just me on my own in this house. And it was really dark. And I'd had a bit of a day of being a loser. And I remember looking into—I had my dinner on my own, and I was washing up my plate, and I saw my reflection. I remembered balancing in that—on those right two wheels. And I thought, "Oh, I could have died." And then actually like properly realizing what that would've meant. And then for six months I was not okay.

As soon as I thought about that, for six months I was just thinking all the time about that, about being dead. And it was—yeah, it was really—but then it meant I did a few good things. And also, I'm not as scared of death anymore.

00:15:01 Jesse Host

That wasn't the only car crash that has like punctuated your life and career, right?

00:15:06 James Guest

Yeah, yeah. I had like two others. So, like there was one after the band split up. We did our final gig, and then I fell asleep in the dual carriageway. So, there was that one. And *[inaudible]*.

00:15:15 Jesse Host

What's the dual carriageway?

00:15:17 James Guest

Oh, sorry. That's like a—it's like a, um—

00:15:19 Jesse Host Is that a goof off, at all?
00:15:20 James Guest It's like a—*[chuckling]* yeah, it's like a goof off. It's like a small freeway.

[Jesse affirms.]

So, yeah, it's like two lanes on each side. And yeah, I fell asleep on that. Woke up smashed into the central reservation, smashed into a lorry, did that a lot. Stopped and no one was hurt. And that one, I wasn't scared afterwards. That one, I didn't get existential, because there were other people in the car with me, and that meant that I was just relieved that they were okay. Whereas the first one, I was in the car on my own. So, the only thing was "I could've died". So, even though the second one was more dramatic, I was kind of—felt a lot more relieved about it.

And then, the third one was with Josie Long and our friend, Johnny. And that was, uh, trying to overtake a log lorry. Miscalculated it. Having a log lorry run over our car and flip over and all the logs falling on us. And that was very—that was the most dramatic one. and that was the one where I thought, "I'm retiring from this, now! I'm not gonna drive anymore." Because that is three very narrow escapes where no one got hurt, but they really should've. And I think if I had a fourth one and anyone got hurt in it, it would feel even worse than it would do anyway. 'Cause I'd think oh, this really could've been avoided. You know. I know that I'm not good at this. I mean, what's amazing to me about your career—at least as I see it from, you know, 5000 miles away—is you have this career as a minutia obsessed standup with secret revelations about your actual feelings. You have this parallel career on the radio that's led to a book that's basically just a list of mistakes and bad situations that you've gotten yourself into. *[Chuckles.]*

00:16:38 Jesse Host

[James confirms.]

00:17:19 James Guest And like, I feel like those are two very different kinds of guy merged into one guy, here.

00:17:27 Jesse Host Yeah, it's weird. 'Cause like—I mean, all those true stories that I told on the radio and that went into the book, they were the things I was doing when I started out in standup. So.

00:17:29 James Guest These are you scrapes, as they call them.

00:17:29 James Guest Yeah, yes, they got called scrapes on the—I don't like to call them that that much. That was someone else called it that, and then it stuck.

00:17:33 Jesse Host No, 100% your idea.

[James agrees with a chuckle.]

00:17:39 James Guest You are wearing a t-shirt right now that says, "Scrape master." I am. I am. That is true, actually, for the listener. And it's tattooed on most parts of my body. But yeah, those kind of—so, they were—that's how I started standup, was everything had to be true. And that was a rule I had was that everything had to be true and don't lie to them. And then, what happened was the audience didn't believe me. I would tell them those stories, and they thought it wasn't true.

And it meant they would stop laughing, because they would be like, “He’s—”

‘Cause when you’re trying to sell something—I think if you’re openly lying and they know you’re lying, it’s fine. But if you’re saying this happened and they think you’re lying, they don’t laugh. ‘Cause they kind of think, “We’re not idiots.”

And you’re kind of like, “Um. So, like.” I just stopped telling them onstage and started openly lying instead and had a lot more fun with that and felt like I was actually able to be a lot more honest about thoughts and feelings and stuff like that. But I lie. But those stories kind of, yeah, were just dormant for ages. And then my friend, Josh Widdicombe, got a radio show and was just like—he started standup at the same time as me. He remembered all those stories. And he just was like, “Do you wanna come on and just tell one of them a week? ‘Cause you’ve—you know, got this material you’re doing nothing with.”

And it’s made so much more sense on the radio. ‘Cause you know, on the radio, why would I lie to my friends to their faces. Like, I’m just sitting there with Josh and one other guest who I pretty much always know. It’s another comic. And the producer, who I knew. And like, they would grill me as well so much on all the details, that if I did have the—you know—if I did lie *[laughs]*, then they would’ve busted me on it really quickly. ‘Cause they would have asked questions; I wouldn’t have known what to say. So, people just believe them, again. And then found it a lot more fun. And so, yeah. It is weird that it’s kind of grown like that now, though. How there’s these two—you know, the book came out last year, and all those standup specials came out this year. And they’re both kind of like—together, they’re the result of ten years of work, really, of like my whole career. And it is strange how different they are.

00:19:38 Jesse Host

What did your mom and dad think about your non-university going, band failing, “I’m gonna become a standup comedian” lifestyle?

00:19:51 James Guest

Well, the standup comedian part was the bit they were relieved about. ‘Cause it was their—it wasn’t their idea, but they suggested it before I thought about doing it. So, like they always just let us do what we wanted. And like, my parents—so, like my dad is a teacher. My mum has been a teacher as well, at points in her career. And you know, they’re proper—you know, they’re proper smart. And they never kind of like made us feel like we had to do the same as them. Me and my brother and my sister. So, like I think my dad—‘cause sixth form is two years. So, you get 16, and then you stay on sixth form for two years.

And I said I’m just gonna leave. You know. At the end of school, I was like I’m just gonna leave; I’m gonna do music. And my dad was like, “Do one year of sixth form. And if you don’t like it, you can quit. But if—you know, if you feel like doing another year after that, you do that. And then you’ll get—you know, you’ll get your A Levels at the end. It’s a good qualification.” And that was the deal that he made with me. So, I did one year, and I thought, “No, I don’t like it.” And I quit. And he was fine with it. And nowadays, he says how he couldn’t believe it. Like, he didn’t let on. He was very cool about it all. But he was like, “I can’t believe he’s actually done this.”

Because like he thought I'd get to the end of one year and go well, I may as well do another year. 'Cause I've done a year already. It wasn't hard. I'll do another one and get a qualification.

And he was astounded that I actually went, "There you go! Did my part of the deal! Not doing it anymore." And he didn't have anything to stand on, so he was like okay, fine. And then when I was in the band, they were—occasionally, they'd vocalize a bit of concern. They'd be like, "Eh, this music's a bit weird." I'd been in more accessible bands before that. And so, they were like, "Okay, this one's really tough and people aren't really going for it." You know. Were you living at home?

00:21:33 Jesse Host
00:21:35 James Guest

I was living at home. And I lived at home until I was 24? 25? And they were like [*grumbles indistinctly*]. 'Cause I'd started doing standup. I'd done like a gig every four months or whatever. And my friends and I think my sister had come to see one of them as well. And they just see me have good gigs, 'cause I didn't care about standup. And so, I'd often have good gigs before I started doing it properly. And then people were just telling my parents, "He's really funny! He should be doing this!"

And so, they were kind of suggesting to me, "Why don't you do standup instead?" Because that's when you know you've really kind of—you've really tested your parents if they're going, "You know what would be a more secure and safe path for you, career-wise, would be standup comedy." And yeah, I think they were quite relieved when I started doing it. Which is [*chuckles*] not common. So much more to get into with James Acaster. After the break, we'll talk about the different ways comics in the US and UK develop their material and how James has struggled to bring his comedy Stateside. Back in a minute! It's *Bullseye*, from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

00:22:25 Jesse Host

00:22:42 Promo Clip

Music: Bright, cheerful music.

Ellen Weatherford: Hey, there! I'm Ellen Weatherford.

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Christian: Listen and subscribe wherever you get your podcasts.

00:23:35	Music	Transition	<i>[Music ends, punctuated with an undulating wild animal call.]</i>
00:23:39	Jesse	Host	Thumpy synth with light vocalizations. It's <i>Bullseye</i> . I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is standup comic James Acaster. He starred in the specials <i>Repertoire</i> and <i>Cold Lasagna Hate Myself 1999</i> .
00:23:58	James	Guest	What did you figure out about who you were through the first five years, seven years of doing standup? That was just like a long process of just like doing different shows and like picking up on different things. It was like, I think first of all was the minutiae stuff and being like, "Oh, I'll talk about stuff like that." And then there was the time where like I discovered that if I did gigs where I dressed like just a little bit—a little bit weird; not like completely wacky, but like if something was a little bit off or a little bit geeky about me, I'd have a better show because they would like often laugh before I got to the mic, 'cause I looked different to the other comics on the bill or something like that.
00:24:30	Jesse	Host	Basically, just like wearing a sweater.
00:24:32	James	Guest	That was all it was to begin with. To begin with, it was like, "Well, I have a sweater and slacks. I'll be wearing slacks and shoes and a sweater and like a polo shirt underneath." Which, for someone who is in their mid-20s, just—I was dressing way too old too young. And that established me to the audience a bit quicker and meant that I could then do the kind of jokes I wanted to do. So, they were like—when they don't know who you are, it helps that they can look at you and go, "I know what I wanna hear from this guy." Like, straight away by looking at you.

And so, I was just trying to kind of go flag it up like this is what *[chuckles]*—it's what we're gonna be talking about. So, they'd go, "Cool. Just 'cause I want that, 'cause I've looked at you and that's what I'd like to hear." So, there was that. And then it just became more like, you know, pulling back a bit more in my persona and not going to them as much, and that was a whole phase of like really honing my writing that way, 'cause I'd leave really big pauses. And I wouldn't—I'd just be really, really low energy. So, the material had to be good; so, I had to really work on my writing and get my writing to just kind of do all the work for me, 'cause I wasn't helping it in any way.

And then after that, learning how to sell it a bit more, and going okay, you can do the writing, now. So, now learn how to perform properly. And like, that tour with Josie Long led straight into a tour with Milton Jones, who's a one-liner comic back home. And those two tours really helped me. 'Cause with Josie, her audience want to see you experimenting and doing stuff that's a bit unusual. And so, I was kind of finding that those kind of routines worked a bit better. And I was writing stuff that suited that a bit more. And then, Milton's audience really like concise jokes and one-liners. So, I had to take the routines I'd done with Josie and really punch up a lot of my punchlines and stuff like that. And probably doing more mainstream kind of like punchlines than I even do now. But like, you know, just learning how to write a joke with his audience.

And I think those two tours back-to-back really—that really cemented what I was gonna be doing for a while after that. Although, there was this stage that—my first debut show was kind of based on those, and then my second show was when I decided I wanted to do routines that were really wringing everything out of every subject. So, my second show was like a bunch of five-to-seven-minute routines, just one after the other where I just stay on one subject for a long time. But then, yeah, again, it's like, half of that is another phase and then—I think there's always got to be another. If you sit in it for too long—I don't know. It kind of gets a bit stale and a bit old, and you don't get as enthusiastic. And then you have to go home and go, "Okay, what's the next thing that I'm gonna do that's gonna be a bit different?" You know.

00:27:19 Jesse Host

So, in the United States, comics tend to kind of generate material on a rolling basis. Sometimes even onstage. And you know, refine it to a really sharp point over a looong period of time. In the UK, comics—especially headlining comics—work almost in a reverse order, which is to say that there's a kind of comedy year that starts at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival with a show. And comics will take some time—you know, months maybe—to write their hour, then perform it as a show. Often a more theatrical experience—you know—more narrative, more thematically based than American standup.

Your series of Netflix specials is basically three of those years' worth of material that you had performed at Edinburgh and toured the country. And then, another special that is like a mix of old stuff and new themes. And that is like by far the most audacious set of stuff to go out as comedy specials that I am familiar with.

[They chuckle.]

Like, was there ever a point where you were just like, "I'm just gonna take the best 15 minutes from each of the last four years' hours" or was there always the plan, "I'm presenting a set. A group of things that go together"?

00:29:00 James Guest

Yeah, it was always that plan. I think—'cause I was on tour—I was watching a lot of YouTube before I went to bed. And one of the YouTube videos I discovered is I like film theories and fan theories about films. And I really got into the Pixar theory, which is the theory that all the Pixar films are telling one story and they're being released at different times on the timeline, but it's one story about an apocalypse. And that's where all the Pixar films take place. And I really love the Pixar theory. I really love people reading into it far too much and—you know—I know that the theory's not true. But what I like about it is people making it true themselves. And it's like a fun, extra creative thing for the fans to do.

And it was that thing where then I was doing these shows one after the other every night, and I was noticing links between them anyway. Because they were all about crime. And so, I was able to do little callbacks to the shows. And I think there was—the first show, I'm talking about being an undercover cop and I've infiltrated a gang. And the second show, there's a small routine where I mention that I used to be in a gang. And because they were a year

apart originally, I never put those two things together. But when you're doing them one night after the other—and I noticed the second night, whenever I said I used to be in a gang, it would get a laugh. And it never really used to. And I was like, "Why is that getting a laugh now?" And I just went, "Oh yeah, yesterday you were in a gang. So, they think you're doing a callback."

And so, I started thinking about my own show in the Pixar theory terms and going well, if they can do it with some films they've not even written, these fans, I can do it with my own show. And originally, I was just gonna have like a post-credits thing. I was going to do all three of the shows and have a post-credits thing where it said what happened to me after—'cause I figured out that one show was actually prequel, and I wanted like a little—you know, this is what happened to James after this.

00:30:46 Jesse Host

You need like—you know, there's that guy who works for Marvel, and he's in charge of the Marvel universe. There's a Star Wars person, too.

[James agrees.]

Like, you're basically trying to create a James Acaster cinematic universe.

00:30:59 James Guest

Yeah! That's what it turned into. Because the people who were filming the specials with me are really into that kind of stuff—they're my friends that are like an independent production company, and when I told them about this, they—'cause they're totally into *[inaudible]*, so they're like, "Okay, so there's this, this, and this." And like, my tour manager as well is really into that kind of thing. So, I was just talking to these people about it all the time. And then, I thought I can't put it all—like, if I put it all as a post-credits thing, it's actually gonna go on for ages. It's gonna be a really long load of writing explaining how—the gap between one show and the other.

And I thought if I just do another show, that fills the gap. And I've got all this material that I've relearned anyway that's the right length of time. And I'll just apply a narrative to it that fills the gap, and I'll do it like that. But I'd already figured out a way that I could film it for no extra cost. So, I said, "I figured out a way that I could do four shows instead of three, and it'll cost us the same amount of money and take the same amount of time."

They were like, "Fine, if you wanna do that, then you can do it." And so, then I had four. But yeah, they kind of like—that part of the plan developed literally the year that we filmed them, of me touring the shows.

00:32:05 Jesse Host

I mean, for a series of standup comedy specials where the microphone cables are color coordinated, it's a pretty unpretentious set of performances. *[Laughs.]* It's—

00:32:19 James Guest

Yeah. Yeah, well, it's kind of—the whole persona has always been an idiot—like a kind of a high-status idiot. So, like you know, I think all those things... it's kind of... in terms of like the mic lead matching my shoelaces and my outfits matching the backdrops and clearly I've had a custom mic stand made and stuff like that that matches the stool—like, I think your instinct when you think about

doing those things is, “Oh no, people will think that’s stupid.” And then you go, “Oh! I’m a standup comedian!”

[Jesse cackles.]

“So, good!” Uh. And so, like a lot of it was that was like I’d think about doing something and go, “No, people will think that’s dumb.” And then I’d go, “Oh no, that’s what you want.” So, then you go with it and do it. So, it was always these things where even if people liked them and think, “Oh, that’s cool that he’s done that and that’s nice!” It’s still dumb and it’s still like not—and sometimes people take it too seriously. Sometimes, people tweet at me and complained that—they always think that I haven’t noticed. And they’re going, “Dude, you really should’ve like looked at the backdrop before you chose your outfit for the show, ‘cause you pretty much disappear into the backdrop, and it’s ridiculous. And like, that’s my only criticism, mate. Like, I’m just saying.”

And you’re like okay. Fine. I mean, you don’t respond to it, ‘cause there’s no point pointing out to them maybe I did that on purpose, ‘cause it’s wrong and you’re not supposed to do it. But yeah, it’s—I think I got away with like—I definitely feel like at times, I am pretentious about it, and I definitely think I had to think about it pretentiously and take myself too seriously, offstage, in order to make them. But I think definitely onstage, at no point do I look—I don’t know, I do look pretty stupid for most of it.

00:34:08 Jesse Host

I mean, it is nice—relative to being in a band—that if you do something ridiculous and/or pretentious, you can just play it off as, “Oh yeah, that’s my stage character.”

00:34:17 James Guest

Absolutely.

[Jesse laughs.]

00:34:23 Music Transition

Every time. This is what I meant to happen, and it was dumb. He’s a clown. So, yeah.

00:34:24 Jesse Host

Thumpy synth.

James Acaster, thank you so much for coming on *Bullseye*. It was really nice to get to know you.

00:34:28 James Guest

Thanks for having me, man.

00:34:33 Jesse Host

James Acaster, from 2018. His new book is called *James Acaster’s Guide to Quitting Social Media*. If you haven’t seen his latest special, *Cold Lasagna Hate Myself 1999*, it is really funny. James is a very funny, very smart dude. You can buy that special on Vimeo! That’s where it is, on Vimeo. So, go buy it there.

00:34:58 Music Transition

[Music fades out.]

Upbeat synth with a lilting beat.

00:35:00 Jesse Host

That’s the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye* is created from the homes me and the staff of Maximum Fun, in and around greater Los Angeles, California. My home is completely consumed by the computer game, *Sim City 4*. I figured out that you can download *Sim City 4* to your contemporary computers from 2003, but it works pretty good on your computer. And now, me and all my children are just compulsively building cities.

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. Our interstitial music is by Dan Wally, also known as DJW. Our theme music is by The Go! Team. It's called "Huddle Formation". 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 I think that's about it. Just remember: all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

00:36:07 Promo Promo

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

[Music fades out.]