

[00:00:00] **Music:** Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.

[00:00:01] **Promo:** *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.

[00:00:14] **Music:** “Huddle Formation” from the album *Thunder, Lightning, Strike* by The Go! Team—a fast, upbeat, peppy song. Music plays as Jesse speaks, then fades out.

[00:00:20] **Jesse Thorn:** It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. Ann-Margret is a classic triple threat: an old school, dyed in the wool Ent-er-tainer with a capital E. She sings, she dances, she acts, and she's legendarily beautiful, besides. And maybe most remarkable of all, she has been a star for 60 years. A genuine legend. Ann-Margret started singing around the age of eight, at birthday parties and family get-togethers. She started singing for money at 16, performing with a band that toured around the Midwest. She was still a teenager when she got discovered by George Burns. Yes, George Burns. He put her into his Vegas act. She got a record deal then a movie deal. The rest is history.

Ann-Margret has appeared in over 50 films, released more than a dozen albums. She's starred in movies and musicals alongside Elvis Presley, Dick Van Dyke and Queen Latifa. She has five Golden Globe Awards, a Screen Actor's Guild Award, and six Emmys to go with her two Oscar nominations. Ann-Margret is now in her 80s, and even at this stage in her life, she still finds joy in singing and moving.

She just released a new album in April. It's called *Born to Be Wild*. It's her first new record in over a decade. It's a collection of brand-new recordings of Ann-Margret's favorite rock and roll songs: “Earth Angel”, “Rock Around the Clock”, even “Splish Splash”. It features vocals from a bunch of Ann-Margret's friends—Mickey Gilley, Aerosmith's Joe Perry, and this one—a cover of “Bye Bye Love” by the Everly Brothers that features her old pal, Pete Townshend.

[00:02:17] **Music:** “Bye Bye Love” from the album *Born to be Wild* by Ann-Margret and Pete Townshend.

Bye, bye, love

Bye, bye, happiness

Hello loneliness

I think I'm gonna cry

Bye, bye, love

Bye, bye, sweet caress

Hello emptiness

I feel like I could die

Bye-bye, my love, goodbye

There goes my baby

With someone new

He sure looks happy

I sure am blue

He was my baby

'Til she stepped in

(Music fades out.)

[00:02:58] **Jesse Thorn:** Ann-Margret, welcome to *Bullseye*. I'm so happy to have you on the show.

[00:03:00] **Ann-Margret:** Oh, I'm glad to be here!

[00:03:02] **Jesse Thorn:** Let's talk about this record. How many of these songs are songs that you remember from before you were a show business pro? Songs that—songs like “Rock Around the Clock” that came out when you were a kid and a teenager.

[00:03:20] **Ann-Margret:** I remember when I first heard that. I was at a roller rink with some friends, and I just—I loved it. All of these songs are ones that I have chosen. *(Playfully sings a few bars of the instrumental.)*

[00:03:40] **Jesse Thorn:** What was it like to hear that song in the sea of, I guess, you know, mostly else at the roller rink, it was like, “How Much is that Doggie in the Window” or something? “Mares Eat Oats”?

[00:03:50] **Ann-Margret:** I—these are songs that I was drawn to. *(Excitedly sings the opening again.)*

[00:04:00] **Jesse Thorn:** You're showing me the moves too. *(Laughs.)*

[00:04:02] **Ann-Margret:** Wait, there it is.

[00:04:04] **Jesse Thorn:** And the hat that your mother knit you is really—is really putting in the moves.

(Ann-Margret agrees.)

What's it like to sing now as a—let's say, a mature adult? How's the experience different?

[00:04:19] **Ann-Margret:** It is still joyful for me, and moving is joyful. I still have that spirit in me, that—I love music, and it does make me happy, and it makes me move. *(Sings the bar again.)* Oh, yes!

[00:04:43] **Jesse Thorn:** Can I ask you about this house that we're in? I—like, in preparing for this interview, I read a bunch of profiles about you—some of which were, you know, 30—and I read one from the '80s—and they all start with describing this house. And I thought like Ann-Margret must love to be on home territory.

You know? Like there's that celebrity profile cliché of describing the thing that someone's eating at a hotel restaurant. And that's because at a hotel, a hotel restaurant's usually where people meet someone that they're celebrity profiling. And they were all here; all the ones that I read were here. Why is that?

[00:05:27] **Ann-Margret:** Because I feel the most comfortable here. Let's see, Roger and I bought this house in 1968, and Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall used to live here. We didn't know any of this when we bought it. We just felt—we had been searching for homes, and this was about—I don't know, the third one. And I just screamed, “Honey! Look at this! There's lemon trees! Come down here, down the driveway!” Oh, it was just everything. And then—that was 1968, and here we are still here.

[00:06:21] **Jesse Thorn:** You were like five or so when you moved to the States, right?

[00:06:25] **Ann-Margret:** Six, yeah.

[00:06:26] **Jesse Thorn:** It must have been a monumental change.

[00:06:30] **Ann-Margret:** Well, Mother and I were living in a place called Valsjöbyn, which at that point had I think 162 people, and now there are 98. Yes, big change. And then—

[00:06:51] **Jesse Thorn:** 62 people heard you and your mom were leaving and—

[00:06:55] **Ann-Margret:** Right.

[00:06:57] **Jesse Thorn:** And your dad had already moved out.

[00:07:00] **Ann-Margret:** Well, it was during World War II, and Daddy didn't want us to cross the ocean, 'cause it was just too dangerous.

I don't know. My daddy had a lot of spirit, and he was not afraid of anything yet. When he went—he first went to Canada, and—I don't know. He had so much strength. Wasn't afraid of anything.

[00:07:31] **Jesse Thorn:** Must have been scary for you though.

[00:07:34] **Ann-Margret:** Yes. *(Softly)* Yes.

[00:07:38] **Jesse Thorn:** What was it like?

[00:07:41] **Ann-Margret:** I remember the night before we left—well, actually it was pitch black, it was so early. And my friends were all standing in a row. There was like seven or eight of them, and we all said goodbye. And of course, we didn't know what was going to happen. But we were—we were ready for anything.

[00:08:14] **Jesse Thorn:** How'd you get here?

[00:08:17] **Ann-Margret:** We went to, um—okay, we first went to Göteborg, which is Gothenburg. And we got on this huge ship called the *Gripsholm*, which is no longer. Then, we arrived in New York City. And of course, I was astounded by the Statue of Liberty. She was light green. And then there was Daddy on the dock. And it was in December, and he had this jacket, and he had a coat over that, and a fedora, and a big smile.

Mother, of course, had pictures of Daddy, and so I knew it was him when he was there, smiling and waving. And I thought, “Ooh! That’s Daddy.” He was so handsome and so well dressed and happy to see us. *(Laughs.)* So, it was a great day.

[00:09:46] **Jesse Thorn:** Did you go from there to Illinois, where you grew up?

[00:09:51] **Ann-Margret:** Yes. We went by car. Daddy loved to drive, and I got his thing about that. I love to drive. And we met—oh my goodness, all the relatives. And it was great happiness, a joyful experience.

[00:10:12] **Jesse Thorn:** We have so much more to get into. Stay with us. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

[00:10:20] **Music:** Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

[00:10:24] **Jesse Thorn:** This is *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. I'm talking with Ann-Margret. She's been the star of movies, like *Bye-Bye Birdie*, *Carnal Knowledge*, and *Grumpy Old Men*.

You said you were a cheerleader growing up, before we went on the air.

[00:10:39] **Ann-Margret:** Yes. Uh, for three years.

[00:10:41] **Jesse Thorn:** When did—when did you start dancing?

[00:10:44] **Ann-Margret:** When I was four, I was told. You know, in Sweden, I started—*(laughs)* uh, I harmonized with my mother, and she would move around, and I would mimic her. I was always moving, whatever kind of music it was.

[00:11:04] **Jesse Thorn:** When did you start performing?

[00:11:08] **Ann-Margret:** Well, they would get little une Marguerite. They would get me to stand up and perform at birthday parties and at wedding receptions and—*(laughs)* yeah.

[00:11:26] **Jesse Thorn:** I mean, are we talking about when you were eight and ten years old?

(Ann-Margret confirms.)

What was the first time you got paid to perform?

[00:11:35] **Ann-Margret:** Oh! Yes, when I was 16. I was singing with a band, the Danny Ferguson Band, in Kansas City, Missouri. Am I right? Because I know—I know you've done your homework. If I say anything wrong, just stop me. *(Laughs.)*

[00:11:57] **Jesse Thorn:** It was Kansas City, Kansas, ma'am.

(She laughs.)

You were singing with the Danny Ferguson Band. How'd you get the gig?

[00:12:06] **Ann-Margret:** Through an agent, whose name was Hal Munro. I believe he spelled it M-U-N-R-O. And he got me gigs in Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Missouri.

[00:12:28] **Jesse Thorn:** Were the band grownups?

(Ann-Margret confirms.)

Was it weird?

[00:12:33] **Ann-Margret:** No, I was always—you know, I had worked with musicians all the time, and they were—they were always all different age groups.

[00:12:46] **Jesse Thorn:** What did you learn about being a pro when you were working as a—you know, working the road as a 16-year-old or 17-year-old?

[00:12:57] **Ann-Margret:** just being very aware that I was a 16-year-old woman who was on the road with mostly men. Perhaps there would be a couple of other women, maybe harp or whatever. Yeah.

[00:13:19] **Jesse Thorn:** What do you mean by that?

[00:13:20] **Ann-Margret:** Well, because of my parents—my mother and Daddy—I knew that not everyone in the world was nice like, you know, my parents and my relatives and friends. So, if anyone tried to get closer than that, then that was off limits.

[00:13:44] **Jesse Thorn:** Did your parents want this career for you?

[00:13:49] **Ann-Margret:** They wanted—they were very, very nervous about it. But they saw that that was the only thing I wanted. And of course, they wanted me to be happy. Yes. Even though, of course, they knew—and believe me, I knew—that I was going to get hurt a lot. My main concern was what it would do to Mother and Daddy. I remember planning a meeting with Mother and Daddy and me at the kitchen table—that's where all the major discussions were, you know—that I was going into show business. And I would use all of the values that they had taught me, wherever and whenever. So, they had faith in me.

Daddy was a wonderful dancer. He loved the tango. And of course, all these Swedish dancers, all the hambo and the schottis. I remember all the ladies, (*in a Swedish accent*) “Oh, Gustav, oh, can I dance with you?”

It was really cute to see. Daddy and Mother just danced together great. Just great. And of course, I danced with him and—yeah, we did the schottis and the hambo. And whatever he did, I did. (*Laughs.*) Father and daughter.

[00:15:31] **Jesse Thorn:** What did they think of jazz and rock and roll?

[00:15:34] **Ann-Margret:** They were really open. They were open people... as long as it was done well. Yes.

[00:15:48] **Jesse Thorn:** What did that mean?

[00:15:50] **Ann-Margret:** Well, you don't just try to do something. You do it with passion, and I did the jitterbug. (*Laughs.*)

[00:16:00] **Jesse Thorn:** Was it scary when you got famous?

[00:16:04] **Ann-Margret:** Of course! Of course.

[00:16:07] **Jesse Thorn:** I feel like one of the scariest things about being a public figure—you know, you were the most public kind of public figure. You know, you're a movie star—is that you have to deal with the fact that so many people know you who don't know you, and that what you mean to them is like a tiny thing that is about them more than you. It's connected to something—you know, it's connected to your skill and talent, but it's not very representative of you as a human being. And like I can only imagine what it would be like to deal with that when you're 23 years old. You know what I mean?

[00:16:57] **Ann-Margret:** Well, I can tell you that, um, whatever Mother and Daddy taught me, that's what I had and that's how I dealt with whatever came my way. They were so—they were so happy, but also very worried as parents. They didn't want me getting hurt.

[00:17:23] **Jesse Thorn:** I mean, imagine they could see you getting hurt. You know, there's no doing this and not getting hurt.

[00:17:30] **Ann-Margret:** I see you know?

[00:17:34] **Jesse Thorn:** I mean, (*laughing*) I can't claim to have been a movie star. I'm inferring here, but yeah.

[00:17:42] **Ann-Margret:** No, you're judged, in anything in show business. You are judged as an interviewer and—as I'm sure you do—your writing. Yeah, you're always judged.

[00:18:00] **Jesse Thorn:** When things went sideways in the late '60s, in your career—I mean, you kept working; you never stopped working. Did you have to think about like what you really wanted out of working in show business?

[00:18:18] **Ann-Margret:** There was a time where I was working so hard and doing my shows onstage that I just—I was tired, and I wanted to quit. Well, that lasted for six months, and then I started again. If you've got this passion, this great passion of performing, you can't tear it out. You can't will it out. It's always there. And here I am.

[00:18:57] **Jesse Thorn:** I mean, there was a period where—in that time in your life, when I read an interview where you said that you were drinking and using so much that when you were acting, you weren't always confident of the line between the acting in real life.

[00:19:21] **Ann-Margret:** (*Sighs.*) Not using. I did, for five years, I drank alcohol. And finally, when it did not work for me anymore—it just didn't gimme that wonderful champagne feeling—I just quit. It just was not working. And I'm blessed that it didn't work. Otherwise, I might still be out there.

[00:19:57] **Jesse Thorn:** I kind of get the impression that you and your late husband came to each other's rescue.

[00:20:07] **Ann-Margret:** Yes. I knew on the third date that I would be married to him, and we were married for 50 years.

[00:20:16] **Jesse Thorn:** What was the third date?

[00:20:19] **Ann-Margret:** I don't know if we had gone to a movie or whatever—it doesn't matter what the date was. I just—I knew that I'd be with him the rest of my life. And we still now would be together, except that he got extremely ill.

We always laughed at ourselves. We laughed at ourselves before anybody else could.
(*Laughs.*)

[00:20:46] **Jesse Thorn:** He quit his own acting career to work for you.

[00:20:50] **Ann-Margret:** He never liked being an actor. Never liked being told where to stand, what to wear. De-dadee, de-dada, de-dadee. He liked telling me what to wear and where to stand, though! (*Laughs.*) I was fine with that. Just fine.

[00:21:08] **Jesse Thorn:** He sang too, right?

(*She confirms.*)

Did the two of you ever sing together?

(*She confirms.*)

Did the two of you sing around the house?

[00:21:19] **Ann-Margret:** Yes. Well, I did. (*Laughs.*) He was so used to hearing me sing all over. And if I was putting a new song into the show, I kept singing it and singing it and singing it. (*Laughs.*) He eventually, at one point started singing the song. (*Laughs.*) “Well, honey, I just—you sang it so much. I know all the lyrics.”

Yeah, we did everything together.

[00:22:01] **Jesse Thorn:** The moment when I—when the thought of you as a show business pro crystallized in my mind as I was preparing for this, was that coming off of your Oscar nomination for *Carnal Knowledge*, which was 1971 I think, you put together a stage show. (*Laughs.*) Like you're like, “What I am is an Entertainer with like a capital E.”

[00:22:32] **Ann-Margret:** Yes, I did. I put together a show and tried to move on as that part, of Bobbie Templeton, took a lot out of me. Of course, I had nightmares. And then, I went in to do some of, you know, John Erman's things. I did six things with John, and *Who Will Love My Children* was one, and *Streetcar Named Desire* was another one. And at one point—I think it was during *Streetcar*—John had to come into my trailer and say—which he never, ever, ever would have. He said, “This is not you. This—you are playing a part. Please don't forget that.”

But I did lose 14 pounds. (*Chuckles.*) That's good.

[00:23:41] **Jesse Thorn:** I don't know. It doesn't—it sounds like the kind of losing 14 pounds that's bad, to be honest with you.

(*They laugh.*)

[00:23:47] **Ann-Margret:** But when I fell, I had that accident—

[00:23:52] **Jesse Thorn:** And you fell on off a stage platform in Lake Tahoe, in a big sort of stage spectacular you were doing in the early '70s.

(She confirms.)

And when I say fell—20 some feet.

[00:24:06] **Ann-Margret:** 22 feet.

[00:24:07] **Jesse Thorn:** Like, very well could have died.

[00:24:10] **Ann-Margret:** But all through the years, when I think about it, my daddy had an accident. He was an electrician, Local 40, in Chicago, and he was on the second floor of a house that was being built. And he fell from the second floor onto cement. And this was in July or August in Chicago. And he was in the hospital with a broken pelvis and just everything. Oof! To realize that I had found the same kind of accident—oh my goodness! But I got over it and so did my father.

[00:25:07] **Jesse Thorn:** You gave the kind of nod of “I got over it” that I am not sure whether to be convinced by.

(They chuckle.)

[00:25:17] **Ann-Margret:** Oh, I continued! And Daddy went back to work, and everything was fine.

[00:25:27] **Jesse Thorn:** You fell literally on your face and had to have like much of your face reconstructed from the inside out.

[00:25:38] **Ann-Margret:** My left side.

[00:25:39] **Jesse Thorn:** Yeah. As somebody who makes their business on screen and especially makes their business on screen not insignificantly by, you know, being famously good looking, that had to be such a terrifying thing that—you know, you had hurt the thing that let you make art for a living. You know what I mean? It's like a ballplayer hurts their wrist, and they can't swing a bat. You know what I mean?

[00:26:12] **Ann-Margret:** When I woke up from it all, I think it took three days. I was just—I felt so blessed that I was alive that I really have felt ever since then that I was saved, because I needed to do more work in my life to help people and—with things that I know about. And I've always been aware of that.

I've helped people with their drinking, and it's something that I know about. So, I feel that that's what—one of the reasons I'm still here.

[00:27:11] **Jesse Thorn:** We have so much still to come with Ann-Margret. Stay with us. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

[00:27:19] **Promo:**

Music: Playful rock music.

Dave Holmes: Oh my gosh. Hi! It's me, Dave Holmes, host of the pop culture game show *Troubled Waters*. On *Troubled Waters*, we play a whole host of games, like one where I describe a show using Limerick, and our guests have to figure out what it is. Let's do one right now. What show am I talking about?

This podcast has game after game and brilliant guests who come play 'em! The host is named Dave. It could be your fave! So, try it. Life won't be the same.

Speaker 1: Uh, a *Big Business*, starring Bette Midler and Lily Tomlin.

Dave: Close! But no.

Speaker 2: Oh, is it *Troubled Waters*, the pop culture quiz show with all your favorite comedians?

Dave: Yes!

(*Ding!*)

Troubled Waters is the answer.

Speaker 1: To this question and all of my life's problems.

Dave: Now, legally, we actually can't guarantee that. But! You can find it on MaximumFun.org or wherever you get your podcasts.

(*Music fades out.*)

[00:28:04] **Music:** Chiming synth with a syncopated beat.

[00:28:09] **Jesse Thorn:** Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. If you're just joining us, I'm talking with the legend Ann-Margret. When she lost her husband, Roger Smith, after 50 years of marriage, Ann-Margret did a bit of reflecting. She decided she was gonna cherish every day and do the best she could. She's also trying new things. A few months ago, she released an album of rock and roll covers. It's called *Born to Be Wild*. Let's get back into our conversation.

I mentioned that your husband had quit his own career as a performer to work with and for you in your career.

[00:28:46] **Ann-Margret:** He never liked being an actor ever. It's just—

[00:28:50] **Jesse Thorn:** So, the two of you were kind of a team for a long time. But I gather that when his illness presented itself—and he had a neurological, muscular condition—that one of the ways that transformed your life was that you were put in the position of being responsible for him, rather than the other way around.

[00:29:25] **Ann-Margret:** Gladly. Yes, I wanted to take care of him, and I was an able-bodied woman. I certainly could do that.

[00:29:41] **Jesse Thorn:** I can only imagine the immense grief when he passed away. Did you have to think about, at some point, who you were if you weren't married to him? If he wasn't in the house, whether you were taking care of him, or he was taking care of you?

[00:29:59] **Ann-Margret:** (*Sighs.*) No, I—we were always together. I didn't think ever of us not being married. But we sure had a good 50 years, boy! (*Inaudible.*)

[00:30:21] **Jesse Thorn:** Do you feel different now, as a single person who had this incredible—you know, you had this incredible relationship that in some ways defined your life, but you also have a new and different part of your life right now. I mean, you just made a rock and roll album, among other things!

(*They chuckle.*)

[00:30:46] **Ann-Margret:** Oh, dear. I wake up each morning, and I'm very happy to wake up. And I'm doing the best I can, and I'm having a good time—a very good time in helping people.

[00:31:06] **Jesse Thorn:** Do you have anything pinned to the wish board now that you've crossed out rock and roll album? Climb Mount Kilimanjaro or something?

[00:31:17] **Ann-Margret:** (*Laughs.*) I don't know! But when it pops into my head, I will do it.

[00:31:22] **Jesse Thorn:** Well, Ann-Margret, I really appreciate all this time. Thank you very much for inviting us over, and thanks for talking.

[00:31:28] **Ann-Margret:** Oh, thank you! How wonderful to have all of you here. Awww.

[00:31:36] **Jesse Thorn:** Ann-Margret. What a joy! Our thanks to her for inviting us to her home. Her new album is called *Born to Be Wild*. Let's end things with the title track, a Steppenwolf cover.

[00:31:49] **Music:** “Born to Be Wild” from the album *Born to Be Wild* by Ann-Margret.

Get your motor running

Head out on the highway

Looking for adventure

In whatever comes my way

Yeah, baby, gonna make it happen

Take the world in the love embrace

Fire all of your guns at once

And explode into space

I like smoke and lightning

Rock and roll thunder

Racing with the wind

The feeling that I'm under

(Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue.)

[00:32:32] **Jesse Thorn:** That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye* is created from the homes of me and the staff of Maximum Fun in and around greater Los Angeles, California. I bought a portable air conditioner, but it's a two-person job to install it. So, it's just sort of sitting in front of my desk, and I have to climb over it to go in and out of my office. If anybody wants to come over and help me, just let me know.

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 Bryanna Paz. Our interstitial music is composed and provided to us by DJW, also known as Dan Wally. Dan and I went to see *Hot Tub* this week. Great Los Angeles comedy show. Had a great time. Sklar Brothers headlined, two of the funniest dudes. Our theme song is by The Go! Team. It's called “Huddle Formation”. Thanks to them and to their label, Memphis Industries.

Bullseye is also on YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook. You can find us in all those places. Follow us. 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 sign off.

[00:33:42] **Music:** “Born to Be Wild” by Ann-Margret.

Head out on the highway

Looking for adventure

(Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue.)

[00:33:47] **Promo:** *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.

[00:33:54] **Music:** “Born to Be Wild” by Ann-Margret.

Take the world in the love embrace

Fire all of your guns at once

And explode into space

Like a true nature child

I was born, born to be wild

I can climb so high

I never wanna die

(Music fades out.)