

[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.

[00:00:13] **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.

[00:00:21] **Jesse Thorn:** It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My next guests are Leon Neyfakh and Jay Smooth. Leon Neyfakh is a journalist, a radio host, and a writer as well as a podcaster. He was the creator and original host of the monster hit podcast *Slow Burn*. Jay Smooth is a writer and DJ. He founded the longest running hip hop radio show in New York, *Underground Railroad*, which ran for decades on WBAI. He's also a pioneering video blogger with incredible insights into race and culture.

The two of them have a new podcast called *Think Twice*. It's about one of the toughest and most important subjects in American culture: Michael Jackson. Not just his biography or his art, but what he means—the greatest pop music icon ever, an avatar of the complexity of race in America, and of course an accused child molester. How do we deal with all these things? How should we? What do we remember? What have we forgotten? *Think Twice* asks those questions.

And look, maybe it's self-evident. I wanna mention that we are going to talk about the allegations that Jackson abused children. So, if that is a difficult subject for you, please be forewarned. We'll also talk about other aspects of Jackson's legacy. So, if it's hard to hear those juxtaposed with the really awful stuff, I understand this one might not be for you. Also, I would like to emphasize that while I can't tell you that Jackson's guilt was proven in a courtroom, I can say that I personally believe his many accusers, and I think Jay and Leon's show does an incredible job presenting those horrific crimes alongside the many other ways Jackson affected our culture. But again, I can understand why it would be hard to hear about all of it together for many people. So, I wanted to let you know ahead of time.

So, let's get into it. My interview with Leon Neyfakh and Jay Smooth.

[00:02:33] **Music:** Playful piano with a steady beat.

[00:02:35] **Jesse Thorn:** Jay, Leon, welcome to *Bullseye*. It's nice to see you, Jay, and nice to meet you Leon.

[00:02:41] **Leon Neyfakh:** Great to be here.

[00:02:42] **Jay Smooth:** Always good to see you, Jesse.

[00:02:44] **Jesse Thorn:** Can we start with your personal relationships before making this podcast to Michael Jackson? Leon, what was Michael Jackson's role in your life?

[00:02:56] **Leon Neyfakh:** So, I would point to two moments that stand out. The first was from second grade. And there was a guy in my class who was into cool music. I knew because he had a different band t-shirt on every day. He had like a Nirvana shirt and a Green Day shirt. And one day he came to class in a *Dangerous* shirt. And I had, you know, heard the words Michael Jackson, but they didn't really mean anything to me because, I think, I was a little Russian immigrant whose parents were not really tuned into American pop culture and therefore didn't really pass him on to me. It's been pointed out to me that, in fact, Russians loved Michael Jackson like all through the '80s and perhaps my parents don't really have a great excuse, but as I say in the show, my mom was so out of touch that she would conflate or confuse Michael Jackson for Michael Jordan, who played for the basketball team in our city, Chicago.

So, I was sort of on my own discovering American culture, and so one of the ways that happened was I would see people's t-shirts. And so, I remember very distinctly seeing the *Dangerous* t-shirt and being just like intrigued by it and, you know, coming to understand Michael Jackson as a real strange figure. By that point—you know, this was 1992, 1993—I sort of came to know him in the form that he was in at that time, which is to say like he already like had transformed physically in certain ways, and he spoke with, you know, a voice that people thought was strange. And so, to me, like my first exposure was Michael Jackson, the weirdo. And then later, you know, at some point in high school I got really into sort of the history of pop music. Like I started reading music blogs and *Pitchfork* and buying old vinyl and trying to like become a completist who knew about every era of American pop music. And so—

[00:04:53] **Jesse Thorn:** You were already basically a budding podcast producer, in other words.

[00:04:57] **Leon Neyfakh:** Well, I think like a lot of journalists, I started out writing music reviews. Like that was my first like thing I wrote, pretty much. And so, yeah, as part of that, I discovered *Off the Wall* and realized, oh, this guy isn't just a weirdo. He like—he's one of the most amazing and most influential pop musicians of our time.

[00:05:19] **Jesse Thorn:** Now Jay, you're the biggest or second biggest Prince guy I know. So, I imagine you had a very complicated relationship with Michael.

[00:05:26] **Jay Smooth:** Yeah, that is definitely the case. You know, I tried to keep this out of the project as much as I could, but, uh—

[00:05:33] **Jesse Thorn:** (*Laughs.*) I kept waiting for that shoe to drop.

[00:05:35] **Jay Smooth:** Yeah. Yeah. No, I tried to have discipline with that, but I definitely would not want to gaslight people on this. Because once we reached the stage that there was sort of a Marvel/DC, Star Wars/Star Trek divide between Michael Jackson fans and Prince fans, I was definitely team Prince. But, you know, just like a Knicks fan will have complicated feelings about Michael Jordan, you know, when they weren't in direct competition with each other, I would still marvel at all of the talent and all the beautiful things he was doing. And I, you know, I grew up with him almost feeling like he was part of the family, as I think many Black families growing up in the '70s and '80s did. You know,

we knew all the dances. You know, we always saw that commercial for the little Michael Jackson action figure, uh, (*rhythmically*) “Looks almost like Michael from head to toe. Put the mic in his hands, and he’ll steal the show.” We would see that every Saturday morning and try to get our parents to buy us one.

And of course, when *Off the Wall* and then *Thriller* came out, I was amazed along with everyone else. You know, we all watched the Motown 25 performance and then came into third or fourth grade class and said, (*excitedly*) “Did you see?! That—oh my god!” It was like a supernatural being making their presence known. So, that was my relationship with Michael growing up. And then, from the ’90s and onwards, I still cherished that relationship with Michael as I grew up with him, but got more and more alienated, concerned, saddened for, and also disturbed by what it seemed like he was turning into over the years.

So, by the time he passed, I think I had become pretty detached. And the outpouring of love from other fans I think drew me back into remembering how I used to love Michael. And it’s been sitting in that complicated space since then, I think.

[00:07:23] **Jesse Thorn:** Leon, you kicked this project off. Jay came in partway in. Why, as a guy who did not grow up let’s say native to Michael Jackson, did you think Michael Jackson was something that you should dedicate a big chunk of your life to?

[00:07:45] **Leon Neyfakh:** So, I had made podcasts prior to this about political history primarily—or exclusively, actually. We had made *Slow Burn*, a season about Watergate, a season about the Clinton impeachment. And then, when we started *Fiasco*, we covered other big political scandals and the fight over school segregation in Boston during the ’70s. We liked to take these big, huge stories that people half remember and try to bring new life to them by talking to as many people as we can who were there and who saw these stories unfold from up close. And so, for me, like Michael Jackson in the cultural realm is sort of as big as it gets. And I just had this sort of feeling that if we were to just turn over a couple rocks, it wouldn’t be that hard to break a little new ground on rendering this—the story of his career and of his life—in a way that was gonna feel fresh and sort of responsive to the moment in which the show is coming out, right?

Like, I think with *Slow Burn* and *Fiasco*, like we try to pick stories that have something to tell us about the present. Like I think the best seasons that we’ve made have all given listeners like a way to think about current events through like unfamiliar raw material, if that makes sense. And so, Michael Jackson struck me as this massive story that was—you know, that was inevitably populated by innumerable people that we could reach out to and talk to. And it was also a story that really felt unsettled to me. Like culturally. I sort of had this question like, where are we with Michael Jackson as a culture? Like *Living Neverland* had come out in 1990—uh, excuse me, in 2019. And there was a period of time after the release of that film where it really seemed like people in my social circle were all like wringing their hands and saying, “Can we still listen to Michael’s music?”

[00:09:45] **Jesse Thorn:** And that was a documentary with first-person testimony about Michael’s alleged sexual abuses of children.

[00:09:54] **Leon Neyfakh:** That's right. It was a—it was a film that really centered the accounts of two men and their families who had been close with Michael Jackson and who alleged that he had abused them. And it was very bracing to watch them recount what happened to them, in their telling. And it really, to me, left little doubt that they were telling the truth.

Obviously, there's a lot of people who questioned their accounts, but just on a human level, watching them go through these details, I just—I felt convinced. And you know, fast forward to 2021 or whenever it was we started this, I just didn't know, like, is Michael Jackson canceled, quote/unquote? Like, can—are people playing him at their weddings? Did they stop for a while and then start again? And, you know, when we realized—and I think it was really when—by this point Jay and I were already working together on this. We realized that all that hand wringing had become, you know, a lot less visible in the past—in the previous couple of years.

[00:10:56] **Jesse Thorn:** Were you comfortable with the idea of doing a podcast about Michael Jackson that wasn't specifically about the question of whether he was a sex abuser?

[00:11:09] **Leon Neyfakh:** Yeah, I think we decided pretty early on that we weren't going to try to re-litigate, you know, the evidence against Michael or the evidence potentially pointing to his innocence. We didn't feel like we were equipped really to do that. And instead, what we wanted to do was look at how the culture processed those allegations. Like in covering, for example, the 2005 trial—like our objective wasn't to say, “Well here's all the evidence on one side and here's all the evidence on the other.” Our move instead was to render the atmosphere at the trial, talk to people who were there, talk to people who sat on the jury, and really just capture what it was like to live through it, whether you were watching news coverage of it on TV or actually sitting in the jury box.

And you know, there is some part of me that feels like it's a bit of a cop out to be like, “Well, we're not gonna figure it out, so we're not gonna ask.” (*Chuckles.*) And that does bother me sometimes, but I do think there's value in setting aside that question and instead telling the story of what these massive public events were, you know, that millions of people experience the spectators. Like there's something to capture there. That's true also, whatever you believe about the allegations.

[00:12:26] **Jesse Thorn:** Stick around more *Bullseye* around the corner from [MaximumFun.org](https://www.maximumfun.org) and NPR.

[00:12:33] **Music:** Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

[00:12:37] **Jesse Thorn:** Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. If you're just joining us, my guests are Leon Neyfakh and Jay Smooth. Leon is a journalist and podcast host. Jay is a writer, radio DJ, and hip-hop commentator. The two recently released the limited podcast series *Think Twice*. It takes a look at the complex life and legacy of Michael Jackson. We'll mention that in this interview, as in the podcast, you'll hear some descriptions of sexual abuse. So, if you or someone you're listening with might be sensitive to that, we wanted to give you a heads up. Let's get into the rest of our conversation.

Jay, you were nice enough to come on this show when Michael died all those years ago, and the feeling that I remember experiencing at that time was just that I wanted to have an uncomplicated relationship with his gifts, and especially what he meant to me as a child. And I wonder what it was like for you to come to this project as a person who—you know, Leon is fascinated by the, you know, sociocultural implications and is—you know, a 19-year-old that really enjoys *Off the Wall* is one thing. Even a person who, you know, sees Michael Jackson as an avatar for Americanness is one thing. But someone who has those feelings about Michael that come from when they were six—it's a very different feeling.

So, what was it like for you to come to this sociopolitical cultural dissection with your own really deep personal feelings that were about your own childhood experiences?

[00:14:42] **Jay Smooth:** Yeah, I mean, those are all questions I asked myself when I got the phone call from Leon and started discussing the possibility of working on this project. You know, it sounded fascinating but also daunting, because I have all these different feelings about Michael that I'm still not sure how to reconcile and have sit peacefully with each other.

But as I talked it out with Leon and got a sense that he understood that sort of ambiguity and complexity and was trying to make a project that would be transparent about that—transparent about us both being in that space and gathering all these voices and perspectives and sort of seeing, in an open-ended way, where that takes us in the process of trying to reconcile all these feelings. I felt like that seemed like it would be worth doing. I didn't really have a concrete sense of exactly where it would go. You know, I haven't worked in this form of long-form journalistic podcast storytelling before. But I felt like it was worth taking the leap of faith to see what comes out of it.

And you know, I'm usually, in my career, making media things that are more grounded in advocacy. You know? I'm usually like this is how I see it, and I'm gonna break down exactly why I see it this way, and I think you should see it this way as well. But as I worked on this project, you know, I came to believe that wasn't really how we could best serve all these voices and stories that we gathered.

I think—you know, I don't think we pretend to be neutral over the course of the series. We have human reactions to this, and I think it's clear by the end that we each lean a certain way as to what we believe. But I think letting it speak for itself and letting it figure out where—letting each listener figure out where they sit with it, where they land, how they're gonna hold it all together, I think—I think that opens up more avenues and more opens up more space for people to evolve and come to terms with where they're at with it than just straight up advocacy and “This is what I think it is.”

[00:16:45] **Jesse Thorn:** Honestly, I wanted you guys to tell me what to think.

(They laugh.)

It's too hard to think of it myself.

[00:16:52] **Jay Smooth:** And I think there's value in trying to come to terms with the reality of humanity, that people who may have done horrible things also had very sympathetic, relatable aspects to themselves in other parts of their lives. I think we can better understand where that evil comes from, how to recognize it, how to prevent it, how to hold it accountable if we're willing to come to grips with that's how humanity works. You know?

That—not to draw in another hot button issue, but what frustrated me about that *New York Times* profile about Liz Holmes, although I do think the writer was copping to being conned by Liz Holmes, I wanted more awareness and curiosity about why was she so susceptible to being in conned. Why is it counterintuitive to you that someone who committed these terrible crimes also seems relatable? When I come to her house and she's petting the dog and putting little socks on the baby or whatever was going on. And I think the more we can come to grips with that's how this humanity stuff actually works. People who are relatable and likable in other ways also are capable of doing awful things. I think that will help us be less likely to get sucked in by the next one that comes along.

[00:18:13] **Jesse Thorn:** It seems like part of why Michael Jackson is such an intense subject is not just the horrible crimes that at least I will say I believe he committed. And it's not even just his extraordinary talent. I mean, if you had asked me 15 years ago, before I knew he was a serial rapist, who the greatest standup comic of all time was, I'd have said Bill Cosby.

But there is something about Michael Jackson's not only cultural ubiquity but also aspirations to a kind of—and like substantially successful aspirations to a kind of like universal magic in art that is really rare, even if you compare it to the greatest standup comic of all time or, you know, Johnny Depp is a great actor who was amazing in *Benny and June* or whatever—that there is like this mythical power to Michael Jackson. So, I feel like that's why I keep bringing up childhood, because aside from the issues of his abuse and, you know, sort of partial arrested development, we see him as magic. You know? We see stars trailing from his hand. You know what I mean? It is hard to humanize.

[00:19:49] **Leon Neyfakh:** Yeah, I mean, he's not very relatable in some ways, right? He's—

[00:19:55] **Jesse Thorn:** In some ways—in almost any way. 88% of ways. There are few ways in which he's somewhat relatable, but—

[00:20:04] **Leon Neyfakh:** I remember reading a piece. I can't remember who wrote it or where it was, but it was basically like, “There are two kinds of pop stars. There's the ones—there are the ones who are successful because you can imagine being friends with them, and then there are the others who are just larger than life, and you can't fathom being able to do what they do. You can't fathom being on their wavelength.” They're just so far ahead of the rest of us in terms of being able to come up with something genuinely new and shocking that's still gonna resonate with everybody. Like, you know, a lot of pop music works by just replicating what has already worked. And people who stand out in pop music history are the ones who have that feel for what's gonna hit that people don't know they like yet or don't know they want yet.

And to me, those are the most exciting artists, are the ones who are giving us something of themselves that we didn't know it was possible.

[00:21:04] **Jesse Thorn:** There was a *New York Times* article the other day when Tina Turner passed away—and Tina Turner, obviously, another sort of transcendent, generation-defining musical talent—that was about her hometown of Nutbush that she had sung about. And that is like a classic way to approach someone who is larger than life, is try and go back to before they were larger than life. And you guys did that, but it's complicated for Michael Jackson, because he was so early in his life larger than life.

So, what was it like to go to Gary, Indiana, where the Jackson family was from, and talk to actual human beings who knew their family, both sort of by local reputation and as people?

[00:21:59] **Jay Smooth:** Yeah, it was such a precious experience to me, getting to go to Gary, getting to meet all of these elders, all of these musicians who were 10 or 15 years older than Michael and his brothers and were working in the steel mills in Gary in the daytime and then plugging away, trying to make a thing out of it as musicians in the Chitlin' Circuit clubs there at night.

It was—I just appreciated so much just soaking in their perspectives and just these lives they had lived, you know, right at the precipice of coming out of Jim Crow, you know, coming to Gary in the great migration. There's just so many dots of history and culture being connected and illuminated for me as I talked to these folks that I would—you know, I feel like that could have been a whole side podcast.

And it gives a lot of insight into why the Jackson family had such a drive to try and make what they made out of Michael especially, and his brothers, once they saw that talent. And I don't want to say that to excuse Joe Jackson's abusiveness, because I definitely heard pretty direct testimony as to what a foul person Joe could be. And Michael was certainly not shy about sharing the extent of the abusiveness that Joe Jackson had. And I—you know, on another level, it definitely reaffirmed for me how entrenched we can be in sort of rationalizing forms of abuse, because it's what we came up with; it's what our parents came up with; it's what we feel like we needed to do to toughen our children up to survive in this world that's gonna be against them.

You know, it—in a sadder way, it definitely connected me with how entrenched we are in those things and still have trouble letting go of them. But hearing these stories of Michael revealing himself as essentially this magical, supernatural being that was already seen as more than a child, as—you know, it became commonplace so quickly to refer to him as, you know, a little person masquerading as a child and sort of project this sense of maturity onto him that wasn't there, as well as seeing him as this incredible cash cow, this rocket to the moon that anyone who crossed his path would be hoping they could attach themselves to. Like that—you get a sense from before he's even seven/eight years old of all the pressure and scrutiny and everything that's coming with this spotlight that goes on his gifts.

[00:24:32] **Jesse Thorn:** There's this Jackson 5 song called “Going Back to Indiana”, and it just occurred to me the other day as I was listening to your show that like, as so many pop musicians are in the business of mythologizing and nostalgizing their home and their childhoods. And I'm like, “Michael was making—was making that music when he was like 13!” You know, like it's way past Nas being 19 or 20. Like he was a child still when he was reminiscing about his childhood.

[00:25:12] **Jay Smooth:** Yeah, he's already sort of reminiscing about back in the days as—when he's hitting puberty. And it's also worth noting, even though they sang that song famously, Michael almost never went back to Gary, Indiana, in reality. You know, he had a grand return decades later that a lot of locals I spoke to in Gary talked about having resentment towards. Like why have you never come back to the town that made you? Like, why—you're supposed to be Gary's favorite son. But this— Sometime in the early 2000s I think was the first time he finally returned. And you know, there were a lot of mixed feelings in Gary, towards Michael, for having left behind the city and the Black community there that made him. While at the same time I—you know, from Michael's perspective, what does he remember in Gary except living in this awful, tiny house under this abusive dad?

[00:26:02] **Jesse Thorn:** Gary also is in some ways an avatar—as you sort of alluded to, Jay—for Michael's Blackness because Gary is a Black town. It's not an entirely Black town, but it's a substantially Black town. And that like time in Michael's life represents a time when his relationship with race as a public figure was less complicated than it was later.

What was it like for you, Jay, in Gary, to talk to Black folks who had experienced Michael in that relatively uncomplicated relationship and seen that relationship complicate over decades?

[00:26:45] **Jay Smooth:** Yeah, it was so interesting to go back to Gary and talk about those issues specifically, because I learned so much about how the town of Gary was at a real crossroads right at this moment when the Jackson 5 were developing, where Gary had been a thriving steel town, you know, that had a mix going on ethnically much more than how we know it now. And right at this time, as this Black middle class was getting stronger, they elected their first, Black mayor, Richard Hatcher. This was just starting to lead to a bunch of White flight from Gary. White people actually formed a new town, named Merrillville, right next to Gary, specifically to get out of this town that was becoming more and more Black.

And that also coincided with the steel jobs starting to fall away and hard times hitting Gary, so that there was a rapid evolution of Gary into a much more segregated, more Black, and more struggling town right at the time that the Jackson family was trying to develop this band into their ticket out of that town into something bigger.

And of course, then they get connected with Motown whose entire mission was figuring out how to take these young, Black artists and make them palatable to White America, so that they could be everyone's superstars. So, he was—Michael was—I think went right from the frying pan into the fire of trying to navigate all these complex racial dynamics at that moment.

[00:28:13] **Jesse Thorn:** What was it like for the two of you to revisit Michael Jackson's trial for the sex crimes of which he was accused when, you know, I'm sure that, like a lot of other people—maybe even most other people—you had kind of spent a few decades working on blocking it out of your mind. Not denying it, but just trying not to think about it, 'cause it's such an unpleasant thing to think about.

[00:28:51] **Leon Neyfakh:** Well, the thing that was eye-opening for me was realizing that people who watched the trial and who reported on the trial every day and who were in that courtroom, they were not surprised by the verdict. The people we spoke to felt that the case

hadn't been made. And I found that quite persuasive. Like I can't say that—having heard their, you know, their accounts of what they saw that I'm surprised they found him not guilty. It seems really true that the case wasn't there.

[00:29:24] **Jesse Thorn:** And if I can interject here, Leon—like a big challenge of the discourse around sex crimes in general, particularly rape but also child abuse and so on and so forth, is that there is this discourse that people wanna push that a court of law is the final arbiter. And it is entirely possible to hold the two things: A, that this was a reasonable outcome of a legal case because the case had not been proven, and B, that one can nonetheless find credible and believe that he was a criminal.

[00:30:07] **Leon Neyfakh:** Yeah, I mean, I think some people do think that's a conversation ender. You know? Like, “Look, the authorities looked into it. They presented the best evidence they had, and the jury found him not guilty.” And I think for a lot of people, that's kind of the end of the story. But I also—yeah, I don't think that just because there is that verdict it means that the rest of us are off the hook for deciding what we think happened.

[00:30:36] **Jay Smooth:** Yeah. And I think one valuable part of the series to me was getting to hear from some of the jurors. You know, one of the jurors we spoke to in particular—you know, you really get to hear what her thought process was like. And as we cover the trial, I think the series does a good job of illuminating how the prosecutors just did a bad job, how it was easy to chip away at the credibility of certainly the parents—both with Evan Chandler and with the Gavin Arvizo case. And I think if you're inclined to do so, it's easy to single out those aspects of the story and look at the settlement as inconclusive, and then the verdict as the last word.

But I wouldn't feel like I'm being entirely real with myself if that's where I land on this. Knowing that at the end of the day you can hear from the juror we speak to that she was guided, as every juror is in the end, by their gut feeling. Like she watched that kid, saw him smirking a certain way, and said, “I just feel like he's not telling the truth.”

And those gut reactions that we all have, they don't come out of a vacuum. They come out of the collective understanding we have in the place and time that we're in. And I think you can hear, as we revisit these times, how differently people might have understood accusations of abuse, how a survivor of abuse will speak, how it is part of the makeup of predators that they will intuit who is a vulnerable victim, who has flaky parents, who won't be able to tell their story well. That all goes into the calculus of who they victimize. You know, I think there's a lot of elements to the story that we'd be better able to understand now and may have made the verdicts play out differently, but certainly I think can allow us to look at it from different angles that we might not have been as equipped to reach back at that time.

[00:32:46] **Jesse Thorn:** We have even more with Leon Neyfakh and Jay Smooth still to come. After dozens of interviews and months of research, did *Think Twice* change the way that Leon and Jay feel about Michael Jackson? They'll let me know when we come back. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

[00:33:06] **Promo:**

Music: Playful piano.

Helen Hong: J. Keith, do you know what I love more than the trivia comedy and celebrity guests on our podcast, *Go Fact Yourself?*

J. Keith van Straaten: No. What, Helen?

Helen: Sharing all of those things with an actual audience!

J. Keith: A live audience!

Helen: Woo-hoo!

J. Keith: Well, lucky for you listeners, *Go Fact Yourself* has brand new episodes featuring live audiences cheering on guests every month. And we still have all of our Zoom episodes with contestants and experts from around the world.

Helen: We can truly have it all.

J. Keith: Yaaay!

Helen: You can hear it all twice a month, every month on MaximumFun.org or wherever you get podcasts.

J. Keith: Yeah, no excuses. So, if you're not listening—

Helen: (*Playfully angry.*) You can go fact yourself!

(*Music ends.*)

[00:33:49] **Music:** Relaxed, chiming synth with a syncopated beat.

[00:33:54] **Jesse Thorn:** This is *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guests are journalists Leon Neyfakh and Jay Smooth. They're talking with me about their new podcast, *Think Twice: Michael Jackson*.

Did making this change your feelings about Michael Jackson?

[00:34:12] **Jay Smooth:** Man, did it change my feelings? I mean, (*sighs*) I think I came away with a more profound sense of what a tragic life and what a tragic story this was. You know? I think I've sort of held back from expressing this, because I don't want to discourage people from listening (*chuckles*) to this 10-episode series, which has a lot of ups and downs, a lot of fun moments, you know, goes to so many different places. But I feel like I came away from it with a profound sense of sadness for how inhumane this life was that Michael wound up leading. You know, how unhealthy it was to—from such an early age—find value, find your

sense of self from how amazing you are in this spotlight, how magical you are as a public figure, how much value you will have because of how you touch people as a performer.

You know, I think in a more complex way than could be conveyed by calling him Peter Pan or anything like that, it left him as a hollow human being, constantly trying to fill these holes inside himself with the beauty of his art, with the public adulation that it brought. And I think it just became a really dark, unhealthy thing for himself and ultimately for people around him.

And as much as I loved and cherished all the art, all the expression, you know, all that he gave us that was a part of my growing up, I feel like there's a part—there's a part of Katherine Jackson's memoir where she talks about before the Jackson 5 had even been formed. You know, they were really struggling in Gary, in this tiny, little apartment with all these kids. And they—you know, they said to themselves, you know, “We need to just leave Gary and build a different life. We have some cousins in Seattle. Let's move to Seattle, get better jobs, and try to build a different life there.”

And they actually embarked on that trip. They started driving to Seattle, and the car broke down, and they couldn't afford to get the car fixed. So, they had to turn around and go back to Gary. And if they had been able to keep going down the other side of that crossroad, it could be a completely different story where—who knows?—we never got to know Michael Jackson in the way we do now, or he never has this stratospheric career, and maybe he's able to build the sort of self-esteem, the sort of humanity, the sort of life that human beings deserve to have. You know, maybe that exchange would've been better for all of us. You know what I'm saying? (*Chuckles.*)

It's hard to—hard to reconcile that thought, since his music is so amazing. But I feel like we could have lived without it. He could have lived a better life, and other people wouldn't have been harmed in the way they were if he had just chosen that path towards the private life—or his family had.

[00:37:06] **Leon Neyfakh:** There's that line in the—towards the end of the show, where we're quoting someone who's watching the memorial for Michael. And he's looking at—I think it was Michael's mother, right? And he is thinking to himself, “Was it all worth it?” I feel like that's sort of what you're—what you're thinking—what you're asking, when you imagine that counter-history where Michael doesn't embark on—

[00:37:29] **Jay Smooth:** Yeah, right. He wouldn't have had all the—I mean, he was so incredibly talented. It's hard to imagine he wouldn't have just inevitably become a star, but I think that's one of the lessons you learn over and over again in this series is that nothing that seems inevitable actually was inevitable. There's always these inflection points where things could have gone one way or another. There's lots of incredibly talented people that things don't fall quite the right way, and we never come to know the gifts that they had. And I think it may well have been a blessing for Michael if he had wound up on that path instead—you know, for Michael and the rest of us.

And I think, uh—yeah, you know, I think it's less likely that he would end his life paying six figures to some scummy doctor to help medicate his whole consciousness away so he could sleep at night. You know, I'd like to think a better ending was there for him than that.

[00:38:25] **Jesse Thorn:** Well, Jay and Leon, I really loved your show, and thank you for taking this time. It's nice to meet you Leon, and always good to see you, Jay.

[00:38:33] **Jay Smooth:** Thank you so much.

[00:38:34] **Leon Neyfakh:** Thank you, Jesse. Great to talk to you.

[00:38:36] **Jesse Thorn:** Leon Neyfakh and Jay Smooth. Their really excellent new podcast is called *Think Twice: Michael Jackson*. You can stream it now on Audible.

[00:38:46] **Music:** Up-tempo keyboard with a steady beat.

[00:38:58] **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 signoff.

[00:40:13] **Promo:** *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.

(Music fades out.)