

[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.

[00:00:17] **Jesse Thorn:** It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. In 2018, Boots Riley wrote and directed his first feature film, *Sorry to Bother You*. If you saw it, you know that it is hilarious and scary and insightful and generally just completely bonkers. Like, I can't get too deep into it without spoiling the story, but yeah. I mean, it is—some wild stuff happens in that movie. And then, Boots had another wild idea: a story about a 13-foot-tall giant. A Black man, a teenager, really. And not about that 13-foot-tall man's superpowers or whatever, but instead about how he sees himself: little personal stuff like his star sign.

Four years later, *I'm a Virgo* premiered on TV. Jharrel Jerome stars as Cootie, the aforementioned 13-foot-tall giant. Cootie was born and raised in Oakland. At first, crammed into a normal house with his aunt and uncle, then in a giant-sized shack out back. He never shows himself to the outside world. His aunt says the world isn't ready. When the show starts, Cootie turns 19. His family wants him to stay hidden. He decides to go out into the world. What could go wrong? *I'm a Virgo* is a fantastic show, and you should definitely watch it. But this isn't an interview about *I'm a Virgo*. I mean, we do talk about *I'm a Virgo* some, but Boots Riley is a writer and his union, the Writer's Guild of America, has been on strike at this point for the better part of the summer.

Boots Riley is also more than just a writer. He was the frontman and founder of The Coup, a fiercely political hip-hop group from the Bay Area. He was also born into activism. His parents were both organizers. Boots was active in progressive politics, including labor organizing, before he was old enough to drive. So, we'll talk about all that too, and we'll talk about what's at stake in the dispute between the WGA and the studio heads, represented by the Alliance of Motion Picture and television producers, or the AMPTP. Also, this interview was taped in June, before the Screen Actors Guild went out on strike. You will hear references to them early on.

I'm so thrilled to welcome Boots Riley back on the show, one of my favorite writer directors and favorite musicians. So, let's get into it. My conversation with Boots Riley.

[00:02:58] **Transition:** Funky synth.

[00:03:04] **Jesse Thorn:** Boots Riley, welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm happy to see you. And congratulations on this new show and all this work you've got going. It's so—it just makes me very happy to know about it. I just—I'm just thrilled about it.

[00:03:16] **Boots Riley:** Well, thank you. Thank you. It's—I started writing it like four years ago. So.

[00:03:23] **Jesse Thorn:** Putting in the work.

(Boots agrees.)

Before we get to the show and some of the stuff you're up to right now, let's talk about the strike. As we record this, you know—knock on wood, maybe it's resolved by the time we—this goes on the air. But—

[00:03:39] **Boots Riley:** Well, how long is it gonna take for this to go on the air?

(Jesse laughs.)

Because I—you know, like from the writers that I saw, they're not ready to give up anytime soon. And based on how the AMPTP is acting right now and that anonymous Apple exec, everybody knows this fight is about much more than these particular issues. It's about power. It's about who gets to say how our work is made. You know, we always—and at times I've been one of them. We always think about capital and the ruling classes not having—you know, not forecasting too far in the future about what they're doing. And you know, like hey, they're just looking for profit, and that's how you can fight them is—you know, you fight them at that point.

But it's pretty clear that they are looking at this new strike wave that's been happening across the country. If you look at PayDayReport.com, they've tracked, and they document 2,900 strikes in the last three years. And we see stuff happening all over the world. We saw like things taking it to another level, even for France, where just a couple months ago or a few weeks ago or something, they were striking. And they decided to cut the power to different politicians' houses, right? The workers at the power plants. So, things are stepping up all over the world. And I think that some of these tech companies that are part of the AMPTP are thinking about things holistically. And so, this is gonna be a—my prediction is this is gonna be a long fight. Unless—you know, unless they're like, “Hey, you know, let's get back to making some movies. Give these folks what they want.” You know?

[00:05:46] **Jesse Thorn:** Besides being a WGA member, I presume you're a WGA member.

[00:05:51] **Boots Riley:** I'm WGA. I'm DGA. I'm SAG. And I used to work for UPS, so I used to be a teamster as well.

[00:05:59] **Jesse Thorn:** So, in addition to all of those things, you've also been a labor organizer and an organizer in broader issues. When you're down there on the picket line with other writers and, you know, allies of those writers, what are the things that you hear those writers are concerned about?

[00:06:19] **Boots Riley:** Well, first of all, you made me think of something that is connected with that vision of being there, you know, on the picket line—writing screenplays as opposed to doing music—for me has been much more of an isolating situation. You know. With music I have to, you know, collaborate and do shows with my band and this and that. But with writing, you know, you're sitting there for hours. You gotta block out the world and, no, you

can't go to this party. No, you can't do it. So, what is happening, what I see with this strike—which is also why it may go on longer—is 'cause it's fun! You know, it's fun to be around a bunch of other writers all of a sudden. Like, you don't usually get that. And there's a lot more—a lot more opportunity for connection with people that are doing what you do. And I think people are feeling that. So, some of it—

[00:07:21] **Jesse Thorn:** I've heard the exact—like, both of my comedy partners are WGA members—John Hodgman and Jordan Morris. And like what I hear from them—besides, you know, terror that even the possibility of having health insurance is gonna get taken away or that, you know, robots are gonna write their shows—is just that it's great to be out there and feel like they have this connection with their colleagues. And they get to see Josh Gondelman or Carol Kolb or whoever it is that they see down on the lines and, you know, like, feel like they're in fellowship, like feel like they're in a community.

[00:08:04] **Boots Riley:** Yeah, yeah. I mean, and that's kind of what many artists are trying to do is like reach out and touch other people. Like, and you know, feel like people are hearing what's inside your head and all that. And especially in this—in the internet time, like it all becomes theoretical, like, you know. And you can get addicted to the internet, because you wanna see how somebody reacted to a thing and all that.

But this is just people. You know? And I think what that original creative impulse came from. So, the strike is gonna go—you know, people—WGA isn't gonna quit striking, because people want to do it too much. You know, people want this connection. So, what I hear people there talking about though—and let me be clear, I live in Oakland, California, which for those in other places, is not near LA. It's six hours north by car. And so, I've only come down besides today for one other day of picketing. So, I'm not there very often, but I am also on various chat groups with other writers and directors, hyphenates. And AI was definitely a big thing and still is. And a lot of folks are happy that the DGA put something in there, 'cause maybe it gives a leg up for the WGA's demands.

Some of the other things that people are talking about, as you know, like sometimes the pay for writing looks good to the rest of the country, 'cause you see how much per week someone gets. But built into that is time that you can't work, that you can't take other jobs because you need to be nimble and ready for, you know, your main one to call back. So, it's really not as much as it seems. So, things like the way people are getting paid, how much people get to do, how much they can—you know—expand. Can they, you know, visit the set and learn more—you know, learn more about it? So, those are the things I'm hearing about.

[00:10:27] **Jesse Thorn:** We've got more to get into with Boots Riley, after a quick break. Stay with us. It's *Bullseye* for [MaximumFun.org](https://www.maximumfun.org) and NPR.

[00:10:35] **Transition:** Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

[00:10:40] **Jesse Thorn:** Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. If you're just joining us, my guest is Boots Riley. He's the frontman and founder of the Bay Area rap group, The Coup. He also wrote and directed the movie *Sorry To Bother You* and the new TV show *I'm a Virgo*. Let's get back into our conversation.

One time I went down to the *San Francisco Chronicle* to visit my friend Peter Hartlaub, who's a culture critic there, with my dad. My late dad. A it's been in my mind, 'cause it was Father's Day. And Peter is in charge of the morgue at the *Chronicle*, which is where all the old material sits. It's like the archive. And he was pulling articles about my dad out of the *Chronicle* from, you know, 1972 or whatever. And we sat down to do his podcast, and he goes, "Oh, you know who I was just looking up?" And he showed me a picture of your dad.

(Boots laughs.)

He said, "You know Boots Riley, right?"

I was like, "Here goes Boots' dad, at San Francisco State!"

[00:11:44] **Boots Riley:** Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

[00:11:45] **Jesse Thorn:** Your father was an organizer and activist.

(Boots confirms.)

What work did he do?

[00:11:51] **Boots Riley:** My father joined the NAACP at the age of like 12 or 14, and through some of that work did stuff like when he was 18 he moderated a debate between Floyd McKissick and Malcolm X. And then ended up joining CORE and with CORE moved to the Bay Area—Congress of Racial Equality—and started going to San Francisco State. And through there, got involved in more radical organizations. And he was part of the Third World Liberation Front that organized the San Francisco State Strike, which created the first School of Ethnic Studies. And he, from there, was involved in a radical organization called the Progressive Labor Party, who then moved him to Chicago, and then to Detroit. And he was involved in everything from auto work to community organizing. He split from that organization and decided to go back to law school.

And so, when I was like—and, but before that—during that time, he was—all the way up to this, he was a bus driver and a full-time organizer for Progressive Labor Party at one point. And for CORE, I think. I think maybe he was at—it gets all blurry 'cause you hear all sorts of stuff. But so, yeah, he met my mother at San Francisco State, and then when he—when he decided to go to law school, he moved back to the Bay Area with us, and so he became a lawyer when I was about nine.

[00:13:45] **Jesse Thorn:** Yeah, I had the experience of having both my parents go to graduate school when I was a kid. My mom when I was about that age and my dad a few years later.

[00:13:55] **Boots Riley:** A lot of boring sitting around books in libraries, being told to draw on long sheets of yellow lined paper, you know?

[00:14:04] **Jesse Thorn:** Yeah. Well, I mean, you got that nice long legal paper.

(They laugh.)

[00:14:08] **Boots Riley:** Yeah. Yeah.

[00:14:10] **Jesse Thorn:** I had to write and draw on standard-sized humanities paper.

(They laugh.)

[00:14:17] **Boots Riley:** No, that's—you know, people walking by, looking sorry, feeling sorry for you, 'cause you're just sitting there drawing. You know,.

[00:14:24] **Jesse Thorn:** I sat through a lot of Latin American studies classes at San Francisco State, as an eight-year-old.

(They laugh and Boots agrees.)

But I feel like, in my experience having been through that with both my parents—who both had very colorful, long and colorful lives; my mom's still having a long and colorful life. I feel like I learned a lot about the choices that were available to be made in life—that both my parents went to graduate school, not because it was the next thing after going to college, not just because the ball was rolling down the hill, but because they really wanted to do something in particular.

[00:15:09] **Boots Riley:** Oh yeah. And that definitely was put forward to me. There was—I didn't have the sense that my—and I didn't even know about this other idea of becoming a lawyer, because it somehow moves you up the totem pole or whatever. He was—and all the people—he went to a law school called Golden Gate, which at the time was thought of as the radical law school. And so, all the people we were around and him, it was clear that they thought that this was an extension of the political work that they had been doing before. And it wasn't impressed upon me that there was some sort of thing of having a successful career or something like that. I didn't get that from watching him. I got the idea that you have to figure out how to use yourself to help people, how to use yourself to help build a movement.

Because I would ask him, especially like being eight/nine years old, you're watching a lot of cop shows, right? And you're like, “Wait, so you're gonna defend the bad guides on tv?” ‘Cause he was being a criminal defense lawyer. And so, that was some of the first talks I would get about what laws were set up to do and who the bad guys really were. Right? And it wasn't who, you know, *Starsky and Hutch* would tell me it was. Right? And so—but it was clear to me that—you know, I was like, “Oh, okay, you're trying to help people.” There wasn't a question for me about like do something that brings in a good, you know, salary. Do something that seems—you know, the—something being honorable, you know, a career that was honorable didn't have to do with something that was paying a lot. It just had to do with something that was helping the world.

[00:17:13] **Jesse Thorn:** Your work, both your music and your films, are really fun. Like, I hear you saying that being on the picket line is fun, and I know that's like something you really believe in.

[00:17:29] **Boots Riley:** Oh yeah.

[00:17:29] **Jesse Thorn:** And I wonder like when you inherit the mantle of radical parents who really believe in dedicating their life to making the world a better place, if they gave you that or if that sat uncomfortably with them?

[00:17:50] **Boots Riley:** Well, as you kind of pointed to, you learn from what your parents are doing, not necessarily what they tell you. So, I don't know if I remember everything that my father said to me, you know, but I know what I saw from him. And so, when we were in Detroit, like I remember there would just be a lot of parties, right? That there would always be people coming in and out of the house. I didn't know if our door locked or not. Like, there'd be all these folks—matter of fact, there was this—like Barbara Ransby, who's now very well-known academic, she was one of the youth that would be coming in and out of the house. Another guy named Wendell, who they made a documentary about, who's a mail deliverer in Detroit. You know, they would be in there, and it would just be full of people. There'd be card parties and all this kind of stuff. And only later did I realize that those were meetings. Right?

So—'cause there'd be music playing. At some point people would start dancing. There'd be bid whist games happening. But there would always be the part where people are sitting around on couches with their legs crossed, and I would just kind of go sit on people's legs or whatever. You know, like, 'cause I was that young. When I learned that that was organizing, I realized that that was people being in community. And so, that's kind of what I learned from folks, and later on when I, you know—so, my father didn't just quit progressive Labor Party. He was part of a split and, as people might know, that's a lot more contentious than someone just quitting an organization.

And so, it was definitely sitting uncomfortable when I joined that same organization that he had been part of a split from. But what I will say is some of the folks that I met there, that I got to know through that all of a sudden, because when I—at the age of 14 and 15—started getting involved with this organization because of the youth side of it that had gotten bigger at that point, I met like the guy that was running—that was the chairperson of the organization at the time, was a guy named Milt. I don't know his last name, but he had to be—in the '80s, he was in his 70s. Right? Very like rambunctious, joking, you know, Jewish dude that was like just always cracking a joke. And this is the leader of the organization.

And then, there'd be, you know, these folks that had gotten radicalized during the mining strike in Britain that had come over. And they would always be like, “How are you gonna—you know, how are you gonna convince someone to go on strike if you can't have a pint with them?” Right? And so—and these were effective organizers. This is what I understood as effective organizers, people who had organized during those strike waves of the '30s, who had organized, you know, in the UK in these certain conditions. And that all of that put together let me know that it's about that human connection, and it's about an optimism. You know, that's where the jokes come in, in the sense of like, you—it's not just because you're trying to make light of things, you're trying to understand things and you're putting those contradictions together. And—but by doing that, you are showing that there is a way out. That it's not just—it's not just that things are bad. It's things are bad, because. And so, therefore this is what we're gonna do.

And to me, that's connected to the quote/unquote “fun”. That's connected to this being alive, being connected to people. I have a song called “Laugh, Love, (*sensor beep*)”. And it's really about like trying to put different parts of my life together and understanding that this need to feel alive and connected and being part of changing the world. And I think that is—you know, I want my work to make people feel alive. And I also need it for myself. I need to make that kind of stuff so that I feel alive.

[00:22:36] **Jesse Thorn:** What did your parents think about rap music?

[00:22:39] **Boots Riley:** Yeah, I mean, I think—yeah, I was supported, and it—I was supported in doing what I was doing. I mean, it's funny, because I was working at UPS, and I met this dude named Pizo the Beat Fixer, who was Too Short's DJ. And I used my money from UPS—matter of fact, E-Rock was my ride to work at UPS, and I was like, “You should come to the studio and be in the group!” Right? And—

[00:23:11] **Jesse Thorn:** This is one of the other members of your group, the Coup.

[00:23:13] **Boots Riley:** Yeah, yeah. One of the original members. And so, we made these songs, and we got him to Pizo the Beat Fixer, who I had met at a rally where I was speaking at, at UC Berkeley. And he was like, “You know, that political (*sensor beep*). That could sell!” Or whatever. And so, we got him these songs, and he put them on this compilation tape that was with us, Spice 1—who also was working at UPS with us—and a dude named Mocedes, who was Tupac's brother, who went on to be called Mopreme. And it was called—this compilation, was called *Dope, Like a Pound or a Key*. Anyway, so I hadn't told my father anything about this, and we're driving down the street. And somebody pulls up next to us with my song playing. And he's like, “That guy sounds a lot like you! You should maybe think about doing stuff like that.” You know, like kind of—

And I was like, (*mumbling*) “Yeah, that is me or whatever.”

(*Jesse laughs.*)

And he was like, “Oh, you know—” You know, and I think he kind of felt left out, and he didn't like the contract that I had signed, 'cause of course he's a—my whole family are lawyers, and I didn't tell them about this, and just signed something, and I wasn't getting paid from it. All that kind of stuff. And so, you know, I told him I had all these other songs, and he actually invest—we made a record label called Polemic Records. And so yeah, he was very supportive. I think our relationship, he was around when we didn't know how to perform, back in the time—as we were learning. Because back then you perform and you don't do good, you get booed. Right? And like—which I think was really good for us. It made us get better.

And he started having a kind of a stage dad sort of thing. And so, you know, when we got our record deal, I was like—we bought him out and just kind of was like, “It's better for us to not have this sort of a relationship.”

[00:25:31] **Jesse Thorn:** That's both really intense and really cute at the same time.

(They laugh.)

[00:25:35] **Boots Riley:** Yeah, yeah. I mean, yeah. No, no. So, definitely very supportive. Separately, we kept Polemic Records, and we put out a group called Point Blank Range, right after Point Blank is on our—maybe on my first and second album as well, just some friends and, um—but, you know, as you know, it takes a lot to do a record label. And so, we didn't really keep doing that.

[00:26:06] **Jesse Thorn:** Did you feel like you knew where The Coup fit into a hip-hop world that, when your records started coming out, was changing really fast and a local hip-hop world that was changing really fast and full of—you know. I mean, this is like—Hammer had changed the face of selling rap records forever. He was from Oakland.

[00:26:35] **Boots Riley:** Well, yeah. And as a matter of fact, the only—the reason we got signed was—so, using what I knew from organizing, I knew with the EP that we put out on Polemic Records that we just had to plaster the city. So, everywhere you went in Oakland and San Francisco, there were Coup posters. And it happened to be after Hammer, after Too Short, after Digital Underground, Tony! Toni! Toné!, and, you know—

[00:27:05] **Jesse Thorn:** And Vogue! We're just—we're just gonna keep—

[00:27:07] **Boots Riley:** Yeah. I don't know. I don't remember if they had come out by then, but yeah. Oh, yeah. They had. Anyway, they—you know, so, every record label was like, “We have to have a group from Oakland.” And we just made ourselves really visible. And at some point, it's to where people were like, “Let me buy this thing to see what the hell it is. Why is that picture all over the place?” And so, we were like number three at the record store, and number one was E-40, number two was Dangerous Dame. And they all were holding out for more money.

And I was like, “Record deal?! Videos?! Let's do it!” Right? So, all of those things—that change is why—and I don't know if we saw it as a—'cause when you're young, a year is a long time. Two years is like an eternity. So, like you don't really see the curve of that change, right? You just know like it is, if you're in the middle of all of that. But yeah, we benefited from that wave that was happening.

[00:28:14] **Jesse Thorn:** We'll finish up with Boots Riley in just a minute. If you've seen his show, *I'm a Virgo*, or his film, *Sorry to Bother You*, you know how truly bonkers his work can be. I mean, I will just say that the horse people in his, uh, feature film are probably not the craziest part of that movie. But somehow his work is also very personal and humane. We'll talk about how and why he creates that very specific tone on screen. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

[00:28:51] **Promo:**

Music: Bouncy synth.

Jordan Morris: I'm Jordan Morris.

Jesse Thorn: And I'm Jesse Thorn.

Jordan: On *Jordan, Jesse, Go!*, we make pure, delightful nonsense.

Jesse: We rope in awesome guests.

Jordan: And bring them down to our level.

Jesse: We got stupid with Judy Greer.

Judy Greer: My friend, Molly, and I call it "having the space weirds".

Jordan: Patton Oswalt.

Patton Oswalt: Could I get a Balrog burger and some Aragorn fries? Thank you.

Jesse: And Kumail Nanjiani.

Kumail Nanjiani: I've come back with cat toothbrushes, which is impossible to use.

Jordan: Come get stupider with us at MaximumFun.org.

Jesse: Look, your podcast app's already open. Just pull it out! Give *Jordan, Jesse, Go!* a try.

Jordan: Being smart is hard. Be dumb instead!

(Music fades out.)

[00:29:24] **Transition:** Thumpy rock music.

[00:29:29] **Jesse Thorn:** This is *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. I'm talking with Boots Riley.

I wanna talk about *I'm a Virgo*, your TV show, for a minute. And we're being mindful of the strike action of the Writers Guild and potentially, by the time this comes out, it could even also include SAG/AFTRA. But I really love the show and wanna talk about it for a minute.

[00:29:56] **Boots Riley:** Yeah. Well, WGA has said that as long as we are setting this up ourselves or with our own publicist, that it's fine. And you know, that took me a second to figure out whether, you know, was that in the spirit of the strike. But talking to some of the folks that are in the leadership of the WGA, they were like, "We decided that we'd rather people be out there talking about the strike and—you know, than not." So.

[00:30:27] **Jesse Thorn:** Well, great. Let's get into it for a minute. How long did you have the central idea of this show, which is a young man in Oakland who is huge? And mythologically huge.

[00:30:41] **Boots Riley:** Yeah. And—yeah. So—and this is important to the beginning of it. Well, first I started writing it four years ago. Started writing it the beginning of 2019. So, if I backtrack from that, it's probably a couple months before that—end of 2018. And for me, the one part that was left out of that was one of the things that initiated it. It's about a 13-foot-tall Black man, young Black man who lives in Oakland, and it's called *I'm a Virgo*. So, what I do is I—you know, I think with my art, as I was talking about maybe earlier but I'm getting a little confused, I am often looking for the contradictions in things and the ironies. And to me, when you're analyzing something, what you're doing is pointing out the contradictions. This part works against that part. This part affects that other part that—you know.

So, you're looking at contradictions and those contradictions exist in irony. And irony is the main driver behind comedy and tragedy. And so—I don't know where it came from, but what I started thinking of is, if you see this—if you saw a 13-foot-tall Black man coming down the street, the last thing you're thinking about is what he thinks about himself. All of these different things. And so, I tried to come up with what's one of the most trivial things he could care about, about himself, that he would think is important to him? And that was, “I'm a Virgo,” right? And so, that's where that started with. I didn't know what the storyline was. And I started—you know, and I was like pitching people: 13-foot-tall Black man in Oakland. Whoa!

And people were like, “We wanna do it!” You know, that sort of thing. So.

[00:32:54] **Jesse Thorn:** I mean the thing that I think is really beautiful about this character is his 19-year-oldness.

(Boots agrees.)

Because his hugeness obviously has ramifications for, you know, practical things about his life that are very sweet and funny. And it has ramifications around his race. Like, metaphorical resonances. But one of the things that this story reveals is the feelings of being a new adult. That he is entering the world for the first time, because he's been hidden by his parents.

(Boots agrees.)

And now he feels like, because he is, the most conspicuous thing in the world.

[00:33:46] **Boots Riley:** Yeah. Yeah. I mean—and the easy thing to call it is a coming-of-age story, but that kind of obfuscates what I'm going for there is that if you are doing it right, every age should be a coming-of-age story. You should be hopefully discovering something new about the world in relationship to yourself and going through these experiences in which you re-situate the world in your brain and are blown away by it. Or like I think maybe, you know, I don't know—but maybe part of the key to just not being bored with life and feeling

invigorated and feeling like you're powerful. And so, yeah, I wanted someone who was not going to be inconsequential in whatever space he was gonna be in.

[00:34:52] **Jesse Thorn:** Why is the show set in Oakland? As *Sorry to Bother You*, your feature, was.

[00:34:57] **Boots Riley:** I'm just a better artist in a place that I know, right? You know, it is—I'm able to look at everything from people to architecture to, you know, and to other situations and not feel like an outsider. Right? One time—you know, I can tell people; it's so far in the past now that I—there's an album that I never talk about that me and M-1 from Dead Prez, we got paid to come to France and do a album with Jeff Beck and Tony Hymas and a bunch of these musicians. And it was kind of like—and the producer was like, “I don't want you to write it before you come! I want you to write it here in Paris!”

And you know, it's a different thing. I'm not—you know, definitely not something I'm proud of my work on. I think the album sounds amazing without at least one of the rappers that are on there. Right? And I think I—you know, I think I'm just a better filmmaker, where I am. There's nuances and details that I can play with and that I think so much of film right now kind of becomes—it can be anywhere. It can be anywhere, maybe anytime sometimes, but anywhere, anybody, all this sorts of stuff. And it just becomes bland and flat. And that's part of—that has something to do with the economics of things and where things are shot and also the fact that usually something is—a producer has an idea, and then they—you know, they're not impassioned enough about it to write it themselves. So, they hire somebody who really wants to do something else, but it's like, “Fine, I'm getting money for this. I'll write this for you.” And then, they hire a director that is doing that too.

So, it's kind of like we lose all these details that might just seem like weird, strange things, but that make it—that make it important, that make it feel real. And it is weird that I might talk about feeling real when obviously I'm doing all sorts of crazy stuff, but I need those—I need certain details to feel real so that I can use them as grounding to go somewhere else, and that could be anywhere from an angle on a building to, you know, the way someone is standing. All those sorts of things. So, yeah. I like it because of that. Also, I want to create—I want to create a scene in Oakland where artists are working together, and you can have a lot more of the same people you work with over and over. And we don't really—we don't have much of a film scene right now in the Bay Area. And this show itself, we had to film a large part of it in Louisiana. Some of that came down to calculations that we made about where we—from the get-go—decided we were gonna have to build a lot of sets in order to do the forced perspective that we did, 'cause we filmed most of this—most of the effects were in camera.

And so, we thought we were gonna need more space than we actually did. So, that kind of made it lean toward, “Well, you're doing that anyway, so go here.” But then, you know, we filmed a lot of the exteriors in Oakland, but the ones—the exteriors that we did film in New Orleans, they were lost opportunities. You know, like where you're filming so that it doesn't look like New Orleans as opposed to filming, you know, either the beauty of New Orleans or the beauty of Oakland. You know, it's like you—picking shots like that is like marrying someone because they're not abusive. It's just not the right reason.

[00:39:13] **Jesse Thorn:** It's a special opportunity that I can see that you take seriously to be able to show the community to itself, whether it's—even when it's in this, you know, as you said, lots of fantastical and ridiculous and silly stuff happens in the show, as it did in *Sorry to Bother You*, right?

(Boots confirms.)

But that you have the opportunity to give people a look at something that they recognize as being theirs.

[00:39:42] **Boots Riley:** Yeah, definitely. And I think, you know, while I would like to say that it's just altruistic and I want to do that for the people of Oakland. It's also the people of the Bay Area as well. The Area is what inspires my art in the first place. So, that's just what gets made. That's what gets made. And that is—you know, one of the outcomes is that I'm painting a crazy picture of the Area. I think it gets to other things. It gets to—it gets to other aspects of humanity, when art is from a place. You know.

[00:40:31] **Jesse Thorn:** I can't believe that you have this many ideas and things, and that—not only that you think it will work, but then at least from my perspective, it does work. Like, do you have like a list of 700 crazy things that could happen in something and *(laughing)* you just make sure 10 crazy ideas happen in every 30 minutes of Booth Riley on film?

[00:40:58] **Boots Riley:** No, no. I mean, you know, I think—you know, I actually do that with, you know, lyrics. Sometimes you're sitting around and, “Oh, this—here's an idea. Let me write it down for later.” And then, sometimes you're writing a song and you go back, and you look through that notebook and like, “I know there's something,” and then, “Oh, yeah!” But that doesn't always feel as organic. But for me, it's just more I create a problem, and then the crazy thing that you see is me having worked out that problem, how to get out of that scenario. So.

[00:41:38] **Jesse Thorn:** And in some way, the problem earns the solution, even if the solution is a crazy one.

[00:41:43] **Boots Riley:** Yeah, yeah. And often the problem is talking about like, you know, how do I make someone feel something that would normally be on screen an idea, right? I want you to experience that. And that's usually where the problem is. And so, for instance, Flora—who is played by Olivia Washington—she experiences life in a much slower way than we do, but then how we experience her is she's moving extra fast. And we've seen people move fast on screen before and whatever, but what I wanted to do was like simulate what that feeling would be. That feeling would feel uncanny and like it's not supposed to be happening.

And so, what we did was we—every time we filmed her moving fast, Olivia Washington, we had three women about her height in colored spandex that we would then film doing the same actions with a strobe light. And so, we have this weird like strobe-y different color people thing that doesn't say she's going fast, technically. It doesn't really say that, but it says something strange is happening. And so, I wanted that feeling like, “Oh, something—” You

know, I wanted that feeling as opposed to—as opposed to the action only, as opposed to just the idea.

And then, on larger ideas. So, there are other ideas, like you know, I wanted Jones's character to be really good at arguing. Right? And so, there was a way to do that with just like—just make her dialogue a lot more convincing, right? 'Cause that's what it might be. But I wanted to talk about what that the feeling of being exposed to that new idea might be like. And so, we have this material that juts out from behind her and puts them in kind of a black box theatre sort of a thing and—where everything is made by stagecraft and—you know, and it looks like that. And look, I mean, everything is made to look like stagecraft. And so, I wanted—yeah, I'm looking for ways to make you feel a thing. And for me, that means not—that means I have to do something that hasn't been done, and it has to come from wanting to solve that problem for that feeling.

[00:44:36] **Jesse Thorn:** Boots, I so appreciate your time, and I'm just—I'm so happy and excited about your work. I just—it's such a joy to me. So, thank you so much for coming.

[00:44:45] **Boots Riley:** Thanks for having me. I enjoy listening to the show.

[00:44:48] **Jesse Thorn:** Boots Riley, a true legend. If you haven't seen *Sorry to Bother You*, his film, it is absolutely a wild ride. It's so funny and moving and invigorating and scary and crazy too. And I absolutely love *I'm a Virgo*. I hope that you will watch it. It is warm and fun and funny and, again, like surreal and scary. All kinds of things. And if you like rap music at all, go listen to The Coup. I really think Boots is one of the greatest rappers of all time.

[00:45:23] **Transition:** Brassy jazz with a steady beat.

[00:45:28] **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. But we're going into the office too! When I was last in the office on Sunday night to record my comedy show, *Jordan, Jesse, Go!*, the Levitt Pavilion in MacArthur Park was jamming. And the whole—all the windows, (*chuckling*) everything. Everything in our office was shaking with tuba sounds from a Banda band. if you're in LA, go watch those fun MacArthur Park, Levitt Pavilion concerts.

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. We get booking help from Mara Davis. Our interstitial music is composed and provided to us by DJW, also known as Dan Wally. Our theme song is by The Go! Team. It's called “Huddle Formation”. Thanks to The Go! Team. Thanks to Memphis Industries, their label, for sharing it with us.

Bullseye is also on YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook. Find us in those places. Follow us. We share our interviews there. I hope that you will share our interviews with somebody you know, who's a metalhead or loves crazy TV shows or rap music or just is interested in the world. Please share our interviews! Okay, I think that's about it. Just remember, all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

[00:46:56] **Promo:** *Bullseye* with Jesse Thorn is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.

(Music fades out.)