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(ADVERTISEMENT)

Jesse Thorn: I'm Jesse Thorn. Imagine yourself wearing Santa Claus's clothes. I mean, if you're up at the North Pole—pft!—that 'fit is a 10 out of 10, no notes! But imagine yourself wearing Santa Claus's clothes in Atlanta, in July, under movie lights. Take it from Lil Rel Howery, who played Santa. Not ideal.

Lil Rel Howery: Now that I think about it—because this is one of those things you wanted to forget about a little bit—it was a lot.

(They laugh.)

It was a lot. It made me think about Robin Williams in *Mrs. Doubtfire*. I'm like, yo, that had to be crazy.

Jesse Thorn: From [MaximumFun.org](https://www.maximumfun.org) and NPR, it's *Bullseye*.

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.

Jesse Thorn: This week, celebrate the holidays with me and Lil Rel, who starred opposite the one and only Ludacris in a new Christmas movie. Plus, Gregg Turkington, the creator of Neil Hamburger, and Henry Selick, director of *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. That's all coming up on the *Bullseye* Holiday Special.

Transition: Thumpy synth with festive jingle bells.

Sound Effect: A crackling fire.

Jesse Thorn: Oh, hi! Wonderful to see you. Happy Holidays. Come, have a seat on my warm, cushy couch. Get cozy.

Sound Effect: Footsteps followed by the rustling of settling into a plush leather couch.

Jesse Thorn: Eggnog? Cider? It's the *Bullseye* Holiday Special. I'm Jesse Thorn, your host. We have a great show for you this year. Lots of holiday treats in store. Let's kick things off with my first interview with guest Lil Rel Howery.

Rel is a standup comic born and raised in Chicago. He'd been working for 20 years or so when his career kicked up to the next level. His big break was *Get Out*, the smash hit horror movie by Jordan Peele. Rel played Rod, the best friend of the protagonist. Since then, Rel has gotten his own sitcom, more new specials, and parts in dozens of films. His latest is called *Dashing Through the Snow*. The film stars Chris Ludacris Bridges as Eddie Garrick, a social

worker and father who dreads the holidays. Rel plays Nick, a jolly old man in a big red suit, who may or may not be Santa Claus.

If that sounds like a cliched setup—well, yes, it is a somewhat cliched setup. But the honest truth is I really enjoyed *Dashing Through the Snow*, and that was thanks in no small part to a performance that only Lil Rel could have offered. Here's a little bit from the movie. This scene is from early on. Eddie is pet-sitting for some friends when he discovers Nick in full Santa regalia rummaging through his friend's fridge.

Transition: Music swells then fades.

Clip:

Eddie (*Dashing Through the Snow*): Hey. You hear me talking to you?!

(Rustling noises.)

Hey, that's not your fridge!

Nick: I mean, seriously?! Simple dictums, tenents, traditions, time honored customs?

Eddie: *(Whispered.)* What?

Nick: Capers? So, they got capers but no bagels, no lox, no green onion shmears?!

Eddie: What are you doing?

Nick: I'm looking for cookies and milk! And they don't have either. They don't have neither—either. Ugh, you know something? I've never been clear on the difference between neither and either. Are you?

Eddie: Neither matters right now, because it seems as if you've broken into my neighbor's home.

Transition: Music swells then fades.

Jesse Thorn: Rel, welcome to *Bullseye*. It's really nice to meet you. I really enjoyed the movie.

Lil Rel Howery: Thanks for watching. It's so funny listening to that, because my kids say I do my performance voice like on everything I'm in, which is really true. I think it was a thing. And they're like, "That ain't your performance voice." And I'm like what that supposed to mean? "Your voice get really high pitch when you're on screen, you get like—you know." Because usually you—like you, I'd say I'm pretty chill. So, I was like show me the performance voice. And they're like, *(in a fast-talking, nasally intonation)* "Hey, man, what's happening right now?"

(They chuckle.)

But I do. It's funny that they noticed that though. It was like, oh, alright.

Jesse Thorn: I talked to a voice coach for a minute, and my goal was to sound less pretentious on hosting my NPR show.

(Lil Rel laughs.)

And I said, “Well, listen to my comedy show! Like, that's how I really talk.”

And she listened to it, and she's like, “That's not how you really talk. That's how you do jokes. That's a very different voice.”

(They laugh.)

She's like, “NPR pretentious Jesse is much closer to the normal.”

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Lil Rel Howery: It's just settings are different. And you know, especially when you learn to perform—even when I'm on stage, I know I bring more energy on the stage, and then—like I do on screen. So, I tell them, “I'm not going to go around just in the chill part of my life like *(high pitched)* hey, everybody!”

I'm not doing that. That's insane.

Jesse Thorn: What's it like to wear a Santa suit through an entire movie? Because it's a sumptuous Santa suit.

Lil Rel Howery: Very hot. So, I had to wear a fat suit along with the suit. And so, these boots are really hot. It was really hot. So, my trailer was like freezing. Freezing. My assistant used to be in there with a blanket on and a coat. And this is in the summertime. People are like, “Why she got a coat on?”

“Because like his trailer is freezing.”

So, I used to like in between shots, go right to the trailer. They kept the trailer close to us most of the time where we were shooting at. Yeah, it was really hot, though. Because it was like in the summer when we were shooting in Atlanta.

Jesse Thorn: There may be show business magic involved in this. But I'm not going to lie, it looks like a very heavy outfit.

Lil Rel Howery: Yes! But what made it work—now, see, it's took a couple things, and I hate I couldn't even really use it for real. So, everything I had to do was before I came on set. So, you know, I do work out all the time—right?—and that's my thing. And that was a big part of it actually to do this role. Ludacris had a trailer gym on set, which used to make me mad. 'Cause I'm like why are you using—? I'm the one wearing this suit.

(They laugh.)

And he was always in the trailer gym. Yeah. I'm like—'cause I couldn't take everything off. Once I put the suit on, I had to wear it for the whole day. It was like using the bathroom twice a day, maybe. Because it was a lot going on. Now that I think about it, because it's one of those things you want to forget about a little bit. It was a lot.

(They laugh.)

It was a lot. It made me think about Robin Williams in *Mrs. Doubtfire*. I'm like, yo, that had to be crazy.

Jesse Thorn: You seem like a guy who makes really considered choices about his career.

(Lil Rel confirms.)

How did you decide that you wanted to do a just straight-ahead, family Christmas movie?

Lil Rel Howery: Well, it was offered to me, first of all. *(Chuckles.)* But also, I—

Jesse Thorn: Is Lil Rel offer only, or are you—?

Lil Rel Howery: I'm offer—I haven't auditioned for anything since *Get Out*. So, all the almost 20-something movies I've done since then, since *Get Out*, it's all been just offers. Which is dope. It's not even a brag, it's like I didn't even know that's how that works. But I don't know, maybe—every time I tell somebody else that, that's like doing really well, they're like, *(seriously)* “I still—I still self-tape.”

I'm like, *(awkwardly)* “Ah! Okay.”

Jesse Thorn: People are trying to bring in a Lil Rel. They're not—like, you're not trying to go to those auditions where it says, “Lil Rel type”.

Lil Rel Howery: Just for me, right? Wouldn't that be weird?

Jesse Thorn: I know people who've gone to those auditions and not gotten it.

Lil Rel Howery: And saw themselves as the type?

(*Jesse confirms.*)

That is hysterical. That's got to be a lot of pressure, too.

Jesse Thorn: So, you're offer only, but you wanted to do—they called.

Lil Rel Howery: I want to do—I do have intentions on—so, Steve Martin is one of my favorite actors and comedic actors in general. And I knew once I hit my 40s, just being honest, I'm like, “Yo, I just want to find like family—either dad stuff or stuff like Santa Claus.” And like Steve Martin has made a killing from that. I feel like that's an open market to just do like *Santa Claus* or *Father of the Brides* and all that stuff. Old men, relationships, divorce.

Jesse Thorn: You were looking for your *Daddy Daycare*?

Lil Rel Howery: I'm looking for *Daddy Daycare*, *The Father of the Bride*, *Shoot the Birdcage*. (*Laughs.*) Any of that! Like, I like stuff like that. Like, but Steve Martin has the blueprint to that. He is absolutely brilliant at finding that. I can't even—'cause you remember, at one time he was like a really silly—he was a rockstar comic actually at one time. And then one day he just became Dad.

Jesse Thorn: Well, he was 25 years old and looked 45 years old, so he was prepared. You know what I mean?

Lil Rel Howery: (*Laughs.*) But it's a great genre! You know, like the *Cheaper by the Dozens*. And he's done really well at that; he just looks so happy. He's one of those guys that makes sweaters and like what I have on—this is—look at what I have on. I have a sweater with the collar out. That's a Steve Martin move. That's a Steve Martin dad move. He just looks comfortable.

Jesse Thorn: I don't know that Steve Martin would be wearing the watch that you're wearing right now, though.

Lil Rel Howery: You gotta mix it up. I'm still from the west side of Chicago, man.

Jesse Thorn: There's only one little light in here, and I can hardly see your face because of the reflections off those rocks.

Lil Rel Howery: I tell people this all the time. I live a chill—it's only certain things that I knew I had to like... (*Chuckles.*) It's like certain hood purchases, I like to call them.

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A good watch and then a really nice car with some nice rims on it. But that's where it stops. I don't do—overdo anything for the most part. But everybody—I was meeting with Morgan

Freeman yesterday, and he kept bringing up my watch. And I had to like put the sleeve over it.

(They laugh.)

(Voice pitched low like Morgan Freeman's.) “I like the watch.”

So, I'm like, *(whispering to himself)* “Dang man, you need to stop talking about the watch, Morgan Freeman. There's so much other things we could talk about.”

(Jesse laughs.)

“You have such a great career. Why don't we—can we—” I tried to change the subject to *Lean on Me*. “You remember that time when Joe Clark had walked in the bathroom, and then you made the boy sing the song?”

He's like, “But the watch.”

I'm like, ugh!

(They laugh.)

Jesse Thorn: If you give the example of Steve Martin, one of the great comedy geniuses of our time, *Father of the Bride* is a good movie. Some of those movies are terrible movies.

Lil Rel Howery: What?! Name one!

Jesse Thorn: Well, I'm—

Lil Rel Howery: Name one! Name one!

Jesse Thorn: I'm not here to specifically insult *Cheaper by the Dozen* or whatever.

Lil Rel Howery: Great movie.

Jesse Thorn: Okay. So, you are not concerned if you go full dad that you're being corny or embarrassing yourself or any of the things that somebody might be worried about?

Lil Rel Howery: Nope! Because, I mean, being a dad—we're very embarrassing. You gotta own that. You gotta own that, at some point, your kids—and that's what's so—I think that's why Steve Martin has a great career. He's owned the fact that he's okay with looking like the embarrassing dad. And it makes you millions and millions of dollars. And that is what Steve Martin is doing. And I'm like, yo, if he can do it, I don't have to be cool. I can't—I am fine with not being cool no more. It's too many people like in their 60s still trying to look cool. And it doesn't make any sense.

Jesse Thorn: It's the *Bullseye* Holiday Special. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is standup comic and actor Lil Rel Howery.

I want to play a clip from your special from last year, *I Said It. Y'all Thinking It*. And this is one of the freshest takes on “kids these days” that I've ever seen in a stand up special.

(They laugh.)

Usually—I'm going to be honest, usually the second somebody gets into “this is what young people are like”, I'm out. Because it usually goes straight into like you know, something about woke culture or something. Some whiny stuff. This is miraculous, I thought. Let's take a listen.

Sound Effect: Music swells and fades.

Clip:

Lil Rel Howery (*I Said It. Y'all Thinking It*): You be like, “Little man, what you wanna do?”

“(Censor beep) whatever.”

(The audience laughs.)

And I try to be positive. Yes, yes, young man! You can put your mind to anything! You can do whatever you want! But I'm saying, what would you like to do?

(Mildly irritated.) “I don't know. Like, reading or *(mumbles)* businesses-es... Something. Nursing?”

He's just throwing out *(censor beep)*.

“Doctors? You know what I'm saying? You know what I mean? Gonna go sell cars, you know what I'm saying?”

Sound Effect: Music swells and fades.

Jesse Thorn: I was really stunned by—the thing that I like wrote down in my head as I was watching that was like how can he be so specific about vagueness? Like, the specificity of those vaguenesses—

(Lil Rel laughs.)

‘Cause it's maddening to think, “Here I am, adult man, worked so hard, so much focus to get to do something. The audacity of not trying and succeeding because of the magic of youth—”
(Laughs.)

Lil Rel Howery: I’m gonna tell you something. You remember like all the times they like—they would describe a surfer dude. You remember *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*? The guy who’s just like, (*stereotypical surfer voice*) “Dude, I don't even know, dude.” I mean, Keanu Reeves represent that. Even though he—I'm not saying Keanu Reeves was any of those guys, but he played so many of them. Watching him be John Wick is still insane to me. ‘Cause like, I cannot believe that guy, who’s just, (*dopily*) “I don't—I don't know. What?” But honestly—and real talk—that's who becomes successful! The guy who doesn't know what the hell is going on! He don't care about society. He not going to school. Even when I do the young guy like, “I don't know, a doctor?” 10 years from now, he could be a doctor! And nobody would know how he had to practice!

Jesse Thorn: I think that is a good working definition of White privilege.

(Lil Rel laughs.)

I mean, it doesn't encompass the whole idea. But if you want to just get the gist, it's a 15-year-old boy who says “doctors” and then become successful.

Lil Rel Howery: Well, you know, it's funny. I mean, unfortunately it's not even—I would love to just put it on White privilege, but (*chuckling*) it’s not. Some of it's hood privilege. You got—I have cats I grew up with that had no—they are so successful now.

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And I did not see that coming. I don't care if they found a real estate lick. Like, they'd be like, “I'm going to be good. Watch. Yeah. Okay.” You’re like, wait, you own what?! This neighborhood?! HOW?

Jesse Thorn: Were you always a try-hard?

Lil Rel Howery: I think so. I think to this day, I like to be really good at stuff. I like to be really good at stuff. So, I study—like, I'm a comedy TV film nerd. Like, you know, I'll watch everything on this—which just honestly makes it tough for me sometimes to be on sets if—sometimes if I feel like things ain't right, it drives me crazy. Like, if I see a setup is wrong or a take too long or even with jokes sometimes, you know. I remember telling somebody one time, he was like, “Try the joke!”

And I'm like, “This is not funny. I can't do this. I'm telling you, it's not funny.” And then you get to the point where like, “Well, let's do this tonight. Let's go to a comedy club. Let's both do sets. If you have a way better set than mine, I will say whatever the hell you want.”
(Laughs.) I don't know. That sounds crazy, because like when you've been doing comedy for so long as somebody that doesn't have—because standup gives you a real experience of seeing when something works right away. And if you haven't experienced that, sometimes I

think like you don't get the rhythm of things. Some people just write stuff just 'cause they think it sounds—and it sounds crazy. I've read things where I'm like this is not funny. It's just mean. We gotta find the humor in this. It's just a mean statement. And then they try to laugh at it.

Like, that's one thing about sitcoms where I love when you're doing a rehearsal and all the writers—you can tell who wrote the joke. Because they be dying laughing. Even if you deliver it bad, they're like (*forced cackling*). Like, come on, fam. I did it on purpose. You're just trying to make sure that—that's weird.

But I don't write jokes like that. Like, I think that's what I love about a lot of my friends is the honesty. Like, I got a good group of comedic friends who are so honest.

Jesse Thorn: What were your Christmases like when you were a kid?

Lil Rel Howery: Really fun! You know, we used to make our own decorations when we were little kids. My dad—was really, really artsy. Like—and it's so interesting about my father, because like—because now I've learned two things. You start learning more stuff about your family when you become an adult. Also, you become the adult that's like taking care of stuff most of the time. So, now everybody's telling you the truth about everything. You're like, wait a minute, what?!

And what I love about my dad was my uncles and his cousins all called him a square, because he was a very artsy guy. This dude—my father could build a stereo from scratch. I remember our Nintendo broke. He never worked for Nintendo ever. He took it apart, put it back together, and it worked again. I'm like, “How did you do it?!” He just had a knack for like electronics and just doing stuff. And then also he was a very artsy, you know, guy. He like would make all these different models and, you know, he'll go to the hobby shop. I didn't know the hobby shop exists! He always like, “I'm going to the hobby shop now.”

I remember at one point, I don't know if my mama thought he was cheating on her, because he'd go to the hobby shop all the time. But he was really doing stuff! But I was like, “What's a hobby—? It's a place to sell stuff for people who have hobbies?”

He'd be like, “I'm going to the hobby shop.”

And it wasn't until I got old, and I started repeating that—like, what the hell? And then I found a hobby shop. I'm like, oh! He wasn't—

Jesse Thorn: You learned about balsa wood.

Lil Rel Howery: It's so much random—! It's a hobby shop!

Jesse Thorn: Different types of glue. This is what they sell at the hobby shop.

Lil Rel Howery: I'm not even lying. It's a hobby shop! It was literally remote-control car parts. He was building ships from scratch. He like did a World War II thing. He made—like, my dad was extremely creative. So, because of that, we made our own Christmas ornaments for years. So, all the way until we got to about 16, the tree mostly was everything we made from over the years. It was like—two things now I think about. I'm like, well, either they were cheap, and they didn't want to buy any ornaments. And my dad was like, “We’ll make our own ornaments!” And then that's what we've been doing. But as a kid, it felt fun to be making our own like Christmas wreaths and little horses and the little like miniature Christmas guys to put on there and the little Santas we did. And we painted it.

Man, we did that for years. And it was just a thing.

Jesse Thorn: Do you remember one that you made?

Lil Rel Howery: I made a bunch of them. I like made a—like, my favorite one was—well, it was a random horse I would make every year. Like, so it was like one horse that was—like, I knew where my horse was going on the tree. Yeah, it was stupid.

Jesse Thorn: You said that like that was something I would intuitively understand.

Lil Rel Howery: (*Chuckling.*) Yeah, I don't know.

Jesse Thorn: You know how you make a horse, because there's a place for the horse on the tree.

Lil Rel Howery: That's how—you know, it's funny. Most people's childhoods, you think everybody else is doing something until you tell them, “You know, we made our Christmas ornaments.”

They'll be like, “Man, shut up!” Like, never mind. “Hey, y'all, they making Christmas ornaments, dummies!”

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It's like, dang, they don't spend time with their families. Let me shut up. I don't want to get jumped over telling people I spend time with my parents. (*Laughs.*) Yeah. That's funny, too. I mean, it's not funny, but it was a lot of times where like I used to be almost embarrassed how involved my parents was, which is crazy. Because everybody else didn't have it like that. And it's like—because people will—that's funny. People will pick on you with the most positive thing going on in your household. (*Loudly.*) “Hey, everybody! Look at—look at them coming here, volunteering! His parents here to volunteer, y'all! (*Laughs meanly.*) They always showing up for him! (*Laughs meanly again.*)”

It's like, damn, stop showing up!

Jesse Thorn: I think my experience is and was that like there's a lot to be said for you're in the hood, and people are picking on you for being corny or trying hard. But there's also a lot more than there is given credit for people being like, "No, no, no. He's one of the guys that is corny and tries hard. We all—go ahead. You know. He's doing his corny, try-hard thing."

Lil Rel Howery: Well, let me tell you something. I've been—

Jesse Thorn: Like, there's a lane for that. You know what I mean?

Lil Rel Howery: So, it had—that was a part of my growing up too. Because like—it's so funny. I remember in high school I was ditching a class one day with a guy who like—'cause where I went to high school at, we had different gangs in the school. And this guy like—he's one of the leaders of the—and he was ditching too. And he was like, "Yo, what you doing?" I'm like, yo, I'm ditching school. He's like, "Man, you one of the dudes just trying to be somebody! Go to class, fam!" You know, I'm like, what? "I got you; go to class." Like, and he ended up making sure nobody bothered me really throughout my next four years of high school. 'Cause he was like, "Yo, you could be somebody." Which is so interesting! Like, he was doing—you know what I mean? He didn't want me to be a part of the dumb stuff, which I thought was cool. And I'm like that—so, it did exist, which is very interesting. (*Chuckles.*)

Jesse Thorn: Did you have the idea that you were going to be something in particular?

Lil Rel Howery: I knew I was going to do—my senior year of high school is when I knew I can really do this. I did a play, and a teacher let me write my own jokes and stuff like that. And I—once again, I went to one of them hood schools. So, like they will heckle anybody. We'll have somebody come speak to us positively like, (*loudly*) "I don't want to be nobody! Go home, fam!" You know, that type of thing. And so, like you're scared to perform in front of them. You're like—

Jesse Thorn: That's when the Reverend Jesse Jackson came?

Lil Rel Howery: (*Laughs.*) "We don't care about you, Jesse! You got Dr. King killed!"
Woah, woah, woah, woah!

(*They laugh.*)

But no. But my first joke hit really hard. That was the first time I felt the roar of laughter from a group. And I was like, ooh, this is addictive. That was something I wrote, and it was—it killed. It's so fun, because it's a play. So, usually I kind of look at them—you know, you're a character, and you hear the laugh like... (*whispers*) Yes! More lines! And then you start doing your other lines. But Yeah, I remember that after we were done doing it for all the different classes—like, the freshman, sophomores, there was a play we did. Seniors and juniors. And every show killed. And I was like, oh, I can actually do this.

And then I was walking around—I felt like *Teen Wolf* walking around school. You know, like when he became the—when he was the wolf, and he started running around just as the wolf, and everybody loved him? That's what I felt like when I—(*laughs*) after the play, I was

like, wow! Like, people was like, “Oh man, you were so—you’re the next Jamie Foxx!” I’m like, wow, okay! I can do this. Cool! And that’s what I knew. I was like, alright, I gotta figure out how to jump into standup.

And I was very specific, too. I was like I want to act, I want to do stand up, I want to direct, and I want to write. That’s exactly what I wrote down. (*Chuckles.*)

Jesse Thorn: I mean, when you say you were very specific, you wrote down all of the categories of—

Lil Rel Howery: I wrote down literally all of that, and I said it out loud. I’m not even lying to you. I said in the auditorium. They let me get a period off after one of the plays we did, so I just sat there in the dark by myself, and I wrote that down, and I just said it out loud. “I want to—I want to act. I want to be a standup, and I want to write, and I want to direct.” And from that point on, whatever—I never had a plan B. That was it.

Jesse Thorn: Did you have a plan A? Did you have a way to—?

Lil Rel Howery: (*Sighs.*) It was little stuff. So, the *Chicago Sun-Times* used to have a weekend plus like newspaper magazine on Fridays that let you know everything that’s going on on the weekend. And there used to be a list of comedy clubs in there. And I said, well, when I graduate high school, I’m going to show up at one of these spots. And that’s what I did. I showed up at a place called The Lion’s Den on the north side of Chicago when I was 19. And that’s where I started doing standup. And I don’t even think I—I don’t even know how I did the first time. I was happy I went on the stage! I was like, oh, I’m on the stage! I had to sign the list. And you sit there.

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It’s so funny. The Lion’s Den is as big as this room right here. But at that time, it felt like it was the Arie Crown Theater. (*Laughs.*) Because I’ve never seen nothing like that before. It was a stage. And it was nothing but a room full of comedians. And I have no idea how I did the first time, but I knew I was hooked after that. I was like, oh, this is so cool! I did my jokes and my book, and I went up there, and I did it! And I went down, and I watched everybody else. Then you’re like, yeah, I’m a part of it! And then you start hanging out with the comics and like, oh, they talking to me!

“Yeah, man, see you next Wednesday!” Okay, I’m hooked. And I was hooked after that.

Jesse Thorn: Did you have material?

Lil Rel Howery: Yeah, it was stupid, though. It was so 19ish. I did a joke—I used to do a joke about, you know, when you wear glasses, you get the same threat. You know, they walk up to somebody else like, “Man, if you say something else, I’ll slap you. And you with the glasses, I’m gonna knock your damn glasses off your face.” And it was—that was my first joke, based off true experiences. (*Laughs.*)

Jesse Thorn: I mean, in Chicago, it must have been famous—you and I are about the same age. Like, the thing that I remember hearing about was Bernie Mac doing standup on L trains.

Lil Rel Howery: I mean, but by that time though—'cause I'm 44, or I'll be 44 in a couple of weeks. And Bernie was already like Bernie. Like, he's becoming this—you know. But you know, Chicago already made—I'll never forget the first really like room I went to where it was a bunch of Black comedians.

When I first started, I didn't know where the Black comics were, actually. You had to find those rooms. And once I did, it felt like I was in the best of Def Jam *ComicView*. I remember it was a payphone in the bathroom. I called my brother. I said, “Bro, everybody's here performing.” ‘Cause when I tell you everybody I saw on *ComicView* from Chicago was there the first night I went, and they all destroyed. And I don't know why Damon Williams—I love him to this day. Damon Williams from Chicago; he's one of our OGs in the comedy game. I was new, man! Why you didn't put me up early, brother?! He gonna put me up after the—everybody—six people got like a standing ovation. Only doing five minutes! And then you put the new guy up, with no facial hair, look like a baby, ladies start heckling. I'm cursing out like, (*high pitched*), “Man, you better shut the (*sensor beep*) up with that ugly (*sensor beep*) wig!”

And I look like a kid. Like, shut your—you a baby! Get off the stage! And then they started booing me, and then the DJ plays “Someone Please Call 911”. One of the saddest walks off the stage. And you don't leave, you just stand there. I was literally sitting in the crowd just smiling like—(*chuckles*) because I was so like devastated. And one of my good friends to this day, he was the first comic that came over to me. He's like, “Hey, you got to change your material. That was—that was terrible.” (*Laughs.*) Meechie Hall, shout out to Meechie. But he sat there with me. He's like, “You embarrassed, ain't you?” I'm like, yes.

(*Jesse laughs.*)

“You don't want to get up, do you?” No. I will wait ‘til every person walk out this damn club before I go home. (*Laughs.*) Because they was booing me like happily booing me. Ain't nothing like being booed when people like, “BOO!” They smiling. Yeah, that happened to me. I got booed, badly. But I came back the next week, new material, and had a great set.

Jesse Thorn: We'll wrap up with Lil Rel after a quick break. Plus, Gregg Turkington of Neil Hamburger and *On Cinema at the Cinema* tells us about the holiday song that changed his life. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

(*ADVERTISEMENT*)

Promo:

(*Sci-fi beeping.*)

Music: High-energy synth interspersed with clips of Jean Luc Picard from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.

[00:30:00]

Benjamin Harrison: Last week, *The Greatest Generation*, the comedy podcast about old *Star Trek* TV shows—like *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, *Deep Space 9*, and *Voyager*—just had its 500th episode!

Adam Pranica: And *Greatest Trek*, the podcast about the new *Star Trek* shows—like *Strange New Worlds*, *Lower Decks*, and *Discovery*—just had its 250th episode.

Ben: So, whether you have a task that's roughly 750 hours long, or you want to learn about some of the production techniques that go into making one of the greatest franchises in television history, you should give us a try either way!

Adam: *The Greatest Generation* and *Greatest Trek*, the best reviewed, most listened to *Star Trek* podcasts in the world. They're on Maximum Fun.

(*Sci-fi beep.*)

Transition: Chiming synth with festive jingle bells.

Jesse Thorn: It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is Lil Rel Howery. He's a comedian and the star of the new holiday movie, *Dashing Through the Snow*.

One of the things that I found charming about *Dashing Through the Snow* is it's very much set in Atlanta. Which, you know, lots and lots of things shoot in Atlanta because of tax laws, but relatively few things are set in Atlanta, especially so sort of self-consciously. And, you know, you and Ludacris are the stars of the movie. Ludacris's character's wife or partner is darker skinned than he is, which is a relief to see any time in a film or television program when the woman is darker skinned than the man in a romantic partnership.

It is like very unapologetically Black. It also, you know, outside of one quick joke about you being a Black Santa Claus at the beginning, it's not about being Black. And you know, lots of non-Black other people in the movie besides the central characters. Was that something that you wanted specifically to sign up for?

Lil Rel Howery: 100% You know, I've been big on—you know, this is one of my second projects with Disney. Well, not now—maybe more than that. 'Cause Disney own everything. So, maybe it's like the fifth or sixth. I don't even know no more. (*Laughing.*) 'Cause they own all these studios, but I did a show called *Eureka*, a cartoon where I play a dad. The dad of *Eureka*, the character—the main character. And I remember one of my voiceover sessions, and this is just being honest—I'm loving what's going on with the show. And you know, I have a certain type of cadence to the way I talk. And they had—(*chuckles*) they had the one Black dude I ain't never met. I ain't seen him in none of the sessions.

He just popped up one day like, “Hey, Rel, what's up?” I'm like, yeah, what's up, man? You know, 'cause they had the little Zoom thing. He said, “Hey, we was wondering if, um... You know, 'cause we're loving everything you're doing. It's so amazing. But, you know, we have

so many different children watching this. If you can—" You know, I can see how uncomfortable he was.

Like, man, just say it. What do you want me to do?

"Could you, um—you know, because there's so many different kids, maybe take some of the soulfulness out of your—"

I say, what, you want me to change my voice?! You know who you hired! That's how I talk. I said, and second of all, if we're like—these are for little kids to watch. They need to hear how different people talk. What am I adjusting? (*Beat.*) What am I adjusting?

Brother then turned this camera off, and then everybody else popped on. So—which is even messed up. They done let that man be on this island by himself. They heard all that! But everybody else's cameras is off.

"No, Rel, we didn't mean—" No, that's insulting. Like, I think—you know, it's no different from the way I grew up. I had to hear—if I watch *Full House*, they're not asking nobody to change their dialect because Black kids are watching it. You know what I'm saying? So, I was like, yo, don't do that. 'Cause what I'm doing is warm. You know what I'm saying? It's a warm voice. It's very warm. Like, let it be what it is.

And that was so interesting to me. And that's why like by the time we get to *Dashing Through the Snow*, and I'm like—I know I'm Black Santa, but that's—I'm glad we didn't focus on just that, because I'm just Santa. Just let me be just Santa! That's not even a real—it's not even a real person! Santa could be whoever the hell we want Santa to be! Which is why, you know, we have these debates about when the *Little Mermaid* is Black or when it like— And?! And I like the fact that, you know, we're standing on that. You know, at the end of the day, it's just—it shouldn't just be about that. We have to think about how we want children to view culture and race. And like, they can come up totally differently if we didn't care about diversifying everything without making it a bigger deal than what should be. Just make it who the character is. If I want to do *Father of the Bride*, a remake, and I'm the father, then it's all, "This is the Black *Father of the Bride*." No, it's not! We're just remaking a Steve Martin movie, starring Lil Rel. So, I don't know.

Jesse Thorn: I mean, that's sold in the room as far as I'm concerned.

[00:35:00]

(*Lil Rel laughs.*)

I don't know if I have the budget to greenlight that, but. Well, Lil Rel, I sure appreciate you taking the time to be on the show. It was really nice to get to talk to you.

Lil Rel Howery: Yeah, this was a great conversation.

Jesse Thorn: Lil Rel Howery. His new holiday movie is *Dashing Through the Snow*. He is really funny in it. It is much better than it has any business being. A very pleasant watch with your kids if you're looking for something to stream this holiday season.

Transition: Playful, unhurried piano with festive jingle bells.

Jesse Thorn: It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. Time now for a very special holiday themed Song That Changed My Life. This week, we have a very special guest.

Music: "My Calendar Lied" from the album *Seasonal Depression Suite* by Gregg Turkington.

My calendar lied when it said it's Christmas time

December 25 implied so much joy

What did I do

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: Have you ever heard of Neil Hamburger? He's a standup comedian. An all-around entertainer in the tradition of Sammy Davis Jr., Rodney Dangerfield, or Tony Clifton. Only his jokes are rarely actual jokes. They are also almost never tasteful. And he hasn't quite figured out what to do with his microphone when he needs to cough.

Sound Effect: Music swells then fades.

Clip:

Neil Hamburger: Ugh. *(Clears throat aggressively.)* Hello! My name is Neil Hamburger.

(Coughs loudly.)

Why did the farmer start a punk rock band?

(The audience asks why.)

(Coughs.) Because he was tired of hauling oats!

(Laughter and applause.)

(Neil dissolves into a brutal coughing fit.)

Sound Effect: Music swells and fades.

Jesse Thorn: And, like Tony Clifton, Neil Hamburger isn't a real person. He's a character, created by Gregg Turkington. Gregg is a comedian and a music lover. Alongside Tim Heidecker, he cohosts the long running series *On Cinema at the Cinema*, which is entering its 14th season now. But back to Neil, America's funny man. He has recorded his first ever holiday record! Hamburger joins the likes of fellow not-quite singers, like William Shatner and Colonel Sanders and the cast of *Bonanza*—all of whom have recorded real full-length Christmas records—for an album called *Seasonal Depression Suite*. The song you heard earlier, “My Calendar Lied”, is from that record.

It's not just a holiday album, though. It is, according to Gregg, something more grand.

Gregg Turkington: It's a musical suite based on the idea that this character of Neil Hamburger, who is a long-suffering, always on the road comedian—based on the idea that he's kind of locked down in a mid-price motel during the holiday season. So, you have a lot of self-pitying songs from somebody sitting in their room, letting their emotions get the best of them during a gloomy, lonely holiday season.

(Music fades in.)

Jesse Thorn: It's also an ensemble effort. Singing alongside Neil, there's Bonnie Prince Billy, Agent Lambert, and an angelic voiced sad clown named Puddles Pity Party.

Music: “Maids Can't Mop Up Memories” from the album *Seasonal Depression Suite* by Gregg Turkington.

This hotel room needs a deep clean

From what has come before

Bad times with bad people

The worn out and the sore

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: Anyway. We asked Gregg Turkington if there was a holiday song that changed his life. And, well, here's Gregg.

Gregg Turkington: When I was asked to pick a holiday song that changed my life, my first thought is there are none of those. You know, I was on tour recently in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania and went to a Thai restaurant before the show.

Sound Effect: The bustle of people in a restaurant.

Music: “Silent Night” plays muffled in the background.

Gregg Turkington: And we sat down to eat, and they had this very loud music in the restaurant, and it was the most corrupt version of “Silent Night” that I’ve ever heard by some sort of sub–Kenny G type artist. And it was just so morbid, and it just crushed my spirit, and I really should have just left the restaurant. Because it actually put me in such a horrible mood, you know?

Yeah, in general the holiday songs don’t do much for me. I do—there’s an album by The Rotary Connection. There’s a holiday album they did called *Peace* that I really like.

[00:40:00]

Music: “Silent Night” from the album *Peace* by Rotary Connection.

Silent night, holy night

All is calm, all is bright

(Music fades out.)

Gregg Turkington: But generally, I stay away from these. So, when I was asked to come up with a holiday song that changed my life, it was tough. But then what more—you know, what is more of a holiday song than a song called “Holiday”? And I realized how much the Bee Gees’ song “Holiday” had meant to me throughout the years. And so, that seemed like the right fit.

Music: “Holiday” from the album *The Bee Gees’ 1st* by the Bee Gees.

Ooh, you’re a holiday

Such a holiday

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

Gregg Turkington: When I was ten, I was into baseball cards and things like this. Music hadn’t really hit me. And I heard on the radio in 1977 a commercial for a new movie called *Saturday Night Fever*, and in the commercial there was 10 seconds of “Stayin’ Alive”.

Music: “Stayin’ Alive” by the Bee Gees.

Well, you can tell by the way I use my walk

I’m a woman’s man, no time to talk

Music loud and women warm

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

Gregg Turkington: And that—it blew my mind. I had never had this sort of reaction to music before, but I was just saying to my mom, “What is this? I have to have this. I need to hear this.” So, for Christmas that year, I got the *Saturday Night Fever* soundtrack and played it to death.

Music: “Stayin’ Alive” by the Bee Gees.

Staying alive, staying alive

Feel the city breaking and everybody shaking

And we’re staying alive, staying alive

Ah, ah, ah, ah, staying alive, staying alive

(Music fades out.)

Gregg Turkington: I wanted to know more about these guys, the Bee Gees, that were pictured on the cover and that had made this magical song. And so, the next purchase that I—you know, I didn’t have a lot of money as a kid, so I would go diving in dumpsters for aluminum cans. I think it was 23 cents a pound. And usually I could—from a week of this, I could buy one album. After *Saturday Night Fever*, I got Bee Gees’ *Gold*, which was a completely different Bee Gees. And I didn’t expect this. I didn’t really know what I was going to get. Here was “Holiday”. Here was, “I Started a Joke” and all these other songs that are not at all disco; they’re baroque pop with a really, you know, a morose mood to them.

Music: “Holiday” by the Bee Gees.

Ooh, you’re a holiday

Such a holiday

Ooh, you’re a holiday

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

Gregg Turkington: And it’s really interesting, something like “Holiday”—from what I understand, the Bee Gees would often come up with a title first and then write the lyrics, sometimes as placeholders. For a song like “Holiday”, I’m not sure you could find too many people in the world that would come up with something as peculiar and downbeat as they did trying to write a song called “Holiday”.

Music:

It's something I think's worthwhile

If the puppet makes you smile

If not then you're throwing stones

Throwing stones, throwing stones

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

Gregg Turkington: You know? And I can't tell you, and I don't think they could tell you or anyone can tell you exactly what they're even talking about in this song with a puppet and all this kind of morbid imagery. (*Chuckles.*) But just in the same way that “Stayin’ Alive” shook me up with like these early Bee Gees songs. And this one in particular just really blew my mind.

Music:

Millions of eyes can see

Yet why am I so blind

When the someone else is me

It's unkind, it's unkind

De, de, de, de, de, de

De, de, de, de, de, de, de-de

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

Gregg Turkington: Yeah, de-de. It's a little more abrasive than bum-bum-ba-bum-bum-bum would've been. It does feel like you're being poked with something. I don't know if their ability to come up with placeholder lyrics failed them for once or what. I almost feel like if there's anyone that can make de-de-de-de-de-de sound beautiful, it's those three brothers. Because it's perfect. You wouldn't—I don't want a word replacing that.

Music:

Ooh, you're a holiday

Every day, such a holiday

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

Gregg Turkington: And you know, musically it couldn't be different than the disco stuff that captivated me. Because I mean, there's—it sounds like an organ and mellotron and strings. There's a little bit of drumming, but not much. And I don't hear any guitar at all.

[00:45:00]

Music:

... if the puppet makes you smile

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

Gregg Turkington: You know, this song does have—does evoke Christmas for me but kind of the dark side of Christmas. You know? We certainly all have a lot to enjoy during the holiday season, but there's also a strange mood that can hit you and family stuff that can, you know, (*chuckles*) trigger a lot of feelings in people getting together. But they may not have even considered the holidays at all when writing this. I have no idea.

I do know one thing is that they recorded “Holiday” the same day that they recorded “To Love Somebody”—in the same session, which is quite a day.

Music: “To Love Somebody” from the album *Bee Gees' 1st* by the Bee Gees.

You don't know what it's like, baby

You don't know what it's like

To love somebody

(Music fades out.)

Gregg Turkington: This song changed my life as part of the Bee Gees changing my life, which is that it's such an interesting catalog of music, so varied. And the quality is always there. This is how far it goes, is that my wife and I—when we had our kid in 2013, his middle name is Gibb. You're thinking about (*chuckling*) who you can honor when you're coming up with names, and we both loved the Bee Gees so much that that's what we did. And then shortly after that, Barry Gibb was doing his first ever solo tour and was coming to the Hollywood Bowl. I said, you know what, we gotta get the best possible seats for this. And we splurged, and we ended up in the front row at the Hollywood Bowl. (*Chuckles.*)

Which, you know, it was some of the best money I've ever spent. Because at the end of the last song, Barry Gibb walks down, sticks out his hand, and shook hands with us and with a couple other people at the front row, and then walked off the stage. And it certainly was a nice—I wouldn't say conclusion, but definitely a nice moment in my Bee Gees fandom.

Music: “Holiday” by the Bee Gees.

Yet millions of eyes can see

Yet why am I so blind?

When the someone else is me

It's unkind, it's unkind

Ooh, you're a holiday

Every day, such a holiday

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

Gregg Turkington: You know, there's nothing about Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer in it, that's for sure. But well, I mean, it's called "Holiday"! So, I say it is the holiday song.

Music:

It's something I think's worthwhile

If the puppet makes you smile

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: Fair enough, Gregg! That was Gregg Turkington, the voice behind Neil Hamburger on the, I guess, holiday song that changed his life, "Holiday" by the Bee Gees. Let's go out on one more song from Neil Hamburger's *Seasonal Depression Suite*. This is called "If This Long Season".

Music: "If This Long Season" from the album *Seasonal Depression Suite* by Gregg Turkington.

Ooooh

If I had children

They'd be two decades old

Would they visit me, or is my room far too cold?

If this long season has any reason

Why are my walls green with mold and peeling?

Peeling

(Music fades out.)

Transition: Thumpy synth with festive jingle bells.

Jesse Thorn: It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. It's kind of a miracle that *The Nightmare Before Christmas* got made. I mean, it is very weird. Even Henry Selick, who directed the movie and is my guest, is kind of amazed that it became a real film. For one thing, it's not the kind of Christmas movie you picture when you picture Christmas movies. It's stop motion, like those old Burl Ives holiday cartoons, but it's shot more like an action movie. The cuts are quick, the camera moves.

[00:50:00]

The characters, almost all of whom are residents of Halloween Town, are kind of scary! Selick remembers having a meeting with executives at Touchstone, which at the time was sort of Disney's grownup brand. The executives weren't that interested in *Nightmare*, really. It was just kind of a favor to Tim Burton, who co-created it. Anyway, the rest is history, as they say. As of right now, 30 years of history. *The Nightmare Before Christmas* is a very rare breed, perhaps the rarest of all: a film that is about both Halloween and Christmas and covers them both perfectly. I mean, people have *Nightmare Before Christmas* Halloween costumes, and Christmas ornaments, and tattoos. Lots and lots of tattoos.

In celebration of the film's 30th anniversary, I'm so thrilled to have the movie's director back on this show. Before we do that, a clip from *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. In case you forgot the premise, *Nightmare* is about the Pumpkin King, Jack Skellington, who lives in Halloween Town. He's bored with the same old annual routine of celebrating Halloween. He wants to do something nice for a change. Then he discovers a place called Christmas Town. He falls in love with it and decides he wants to give Santa Claus a break. So, Jack Skellington and his fellow Halloween Towners take over Christmas. Step one of which, of course, is kidnapping Santa Claus.

Transition: Music swells then fades.

Clip:

Music: Playfully spooky background music.

Lock, Shock, & Barrel (*The Nightmare Before Christmas*): *(Talking all at once.)*
Jack! This time we bagged him!

Lock: This time we really did!

Barrel: He sure is big, Jack!

Shock: And heavyyy!

Santa Claus: (*Furiously.*) Let me out!

(*A thump; the children gasp.*)

Jack: Sandy Claws! In person! What a pleasure to meet you! Wh-why you have hands! You don't have claws at all!

Santa Claus: Where am I?

Jack: Surprised, aren't you? I knew you would be. You don't need to have another worry about Christmas this year.

Santa Claus: Wh-what?! Wha—?

Jack: (*Excitedly.*) Consider this a vacation, Sandy! (*A squeak.*) A reward. It's your turn to take it easy.

Santa Claus: But there must be some mistake!

Transition: Music swells then fades.

Jesse Thorn: Henry Selick, welcome back to the show. It's very nice to see you. Thank you for doing this.

Henry Selick: Yeah, thanks for inviting me. Happy to be here.

Jesse Thorn: I watched the 30th anniversary edition of *Nightmare Before Christmas* in what they call 4D—which is where you wear 3D glasses, and then you sit in a chair that like flings you around, and they spray scents at you.

Henry Selick: Oh boy, I haven't done that myself. What was it like?

Jesse Thorn: Uh, it was intense. (*Laughs.*) Henry, it's not a not-intense movie to begin with.

Henry Selick: I'm especially interested in the odors that were sprayed at you. Do you recall?

Jesse Thorn: Yeah, there was like a—there's like a Christmas tree odor. There's an odor for when they're making a potion. There's like a foul, noxious brew odor. I can't remember the other ones, but they also—they blow air at you from different places in windy parts. And went with my daughter, and I thought—my daughter has a lot of sensory issues. And I thought either we're going to be out of there 10 minutes in—like either this is going to be a catastrophic disaster, or this is going to be completely compelling. And it was the latter. She

like locked in and was there for the whole movie 100%. Like, the (*chuckling*) getting flopped around in a movie theater chair turns out to be the secret to holding her attention.

Henry Selick: That's fantastic! And I'm happy it worked out for her.

Jesse Thorn: I think listening to just the audio there, you can tell what a roiling, rambunctious movie it is. Did you have an idea of how you wanted it to feel, experiencing the movie?

Henry Selick: Yeah, I was always sort of conscious of this idea that if I could reach out and touch the worlds, touch the moments, what did I want them to feel like? You know, for example, Christmas Town, it's very soft. The hills are, you know, rounded and smooth. The real world, it's sort of all isometric and just sharp corners and replicates.

[00:55:00]

And then when we come to Halloween Town, it was a sort of a mix of pointed, sharp, but not piercing. So, there was always going to be some fun and minimal danger. So, I started with, you know, the visual idea of what separates these places. How would it feel if you could reach out and touch them? And your eyes are sort of touching them in that way. And it was kind of something I learned in the course of making it. What was a little too far and what wasn't?

I'll give you a good example. You know, we meet Sally, and the evil scientist catches her by the arm, and she tears away. And I thought, well, she's like a Frankenstein doll, but I don't think she should be filled with flesh. I don't think she should literally be that. And I felt instead, I'll stuff her with autumn leaves. So, little things like that help sort of determine what are the rules and what's too much, you know, for this movie. What helps define the feeling of it?

Jesse Thorn: I have to say that one of the things that I find scary in the movie—and nothing in the movie is overwhelmingly scary to me or inappropriate for kids, I think—but one of the things that I find scary is the way the well-intentionedness of the people or characters of Halloween Town goes wrong. Like, there's something about the idea of trying really hard to do it right and having it come out off-kilter that is kind of freaky!

Henry Selick: Well, the idea—it's one thing I love so much about Jack. He's so full of himself. He's absolutely determined that he could do a better job than Santa Claus, you know? There's all this enthusiasm. He's going down the line where the denizens are making the gifts. “No, no, no! That's all wrong.”

Music: “Making Christmas” from *The Nightmare Before Christmas*.

Jack: No, no, no! Now that's all wrong. This thing will never make a present! It's been dead for much too long. Try something fresher, something pleasant! Try again, don't give up!

All together, that and this

With all our tricks

We'll make it Christmas time!

(Music fades out.)

Henry Selick: (*Chuckling.*) No, it's still wrong. You know, those scary toys that they bring, they're terrifying! You know, like that vampire Mickey Mouse doll, the gunshot duck decoy, the huge snake that's devouring the Christmas tree of those two little girls. Those are pretty scary. And I think you're right. Where that goes wrong—great intentions, but they can't help but make them scary. It's who they are, the characters from Halloween Town.

Jesse Thorn: What elements of 2D animation—traditional cell animation—inform how you make stop motion animation?

Henry Selick: Yeah, I was lucky enough to get a lot of training at Disney. You know, unlike a lot of the other kids who were there at Cal Arts, which is where I went, and then at Disney—I wasn't this Disney maniac who could draw every character. I was a maniac more for other types of animation. But it was a kind of a great opportunity to learn more. And one of the—and some of the things we learned in 2D animation is like posing characters. Think of them as silhouettes. What's going to read? Especially in scenes with maybe not much dialogue. So, they were always looking for clarity of a pose, usually outside-the-body gestures. And things like that informed what we did.

We would—you know, overall, a sense of timing, of—you know, what's going to read is the number one thing. Is it fast enough to be exciting? Is it too fast to follow? We do have some limitations in stop motion. We're shooting every frame sharp. You can now add motion blur later. But in 2D animation, you actually would draw in smears. And you could shoot a lot of really good-looking stuff with 12 images a second. But we generally had to do 20, 24.

[01:00:00]

So, there's definitely inspiration and overlap. But then the peculiarities of stop motion, you know, stand up and have to be paid attention to.

Jesse Thorn: We'll wrap up with Henry Selick, director of *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, after a break. When we return, what are the holiday traditions in the Selick family? Do they watch Henry's own beloved Christmas movie? Stay with us to find out. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

(ADVERTISEMENT)

Promo:

Music: Bright, bouncy synth.

Cameron Esposito: Cameron Esposito here, comedian and host of *Queery*. Every week, I get to interview someone amazing from the LGBTQIA+ community. Some queeros! I chat with them about their lives, loves, careers, and more. I've talked to, you know, giant celebs, Trixie Mattel, Lena Waithe, Tegan and Sara Quin, but also astronauts, reverends, nurses. It's funny, it gets deep, and hopefully it makes you feel like you're part of something. Join me every Monday on Maximum Fun to listen to *Queery* with Cameron Esposito.

(Music fades out.)

Transition: Thumpy synth with festive jingle bells.

Jesse Thorn: It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. I'm talking with Henry Selick. He's a filmmaker and animator. Alongside Tim Burton, he created *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. The beloved Halloween/Christmas film is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year. Let's get back into our conversation.

When you were making *Nightmare Before Christmas*, you had one strong advantage. Which was you had a producer in Tim Burton, who had—you know, also on whose drawings the film was based—who had a lot of juice. Because he had just made *Batman*, the most successful movie of all time at the time. At the same time, though, even maybe compared to *Beetlejuice*—which was also very successful—this is a weird movie. *(Laughs.)* And you're making it for Disney. You know, it didn't end up coming out with Disney before the title, but you're still making it for the Disney company. Were you worried is it even possible to get a movie this weird finished while Disney is working on, you know, *The Little Mermaid* or whatever? You know, just regular stuff?

Henry Selick: I mean, at the beginning, I was concerned. You know, I knew Tim pretty well. We'd become pretty close friends, and he thoroughly trusted me. He was going to—while we were making this film, he was going to make the second *Batman*. And he actually went on to make *Ed Wood Jr.* as well, because live action's faster. But there were two things that kind of came up. One was a Disney animation executive took me out for lunch. This is an executive who had three or four lunches a day. They were 15 minutes long. *(Chuckles.)* They ate their sandwiches faster than anyone I've ever met!

But they basically explained—you know, we had a pretty low budget compared to the other animated films—that it was a gift to Tim Burton to get him to come back to Disney to do big projects. So, that's why I had to keep the budget down where it was, because that's what they saw it as. They didn't think of it as something great or could be great or could make money for them in a big way. So, that was eye opening to me.

And the other thing was, you know, we shared our dailies. You know, what you shoot—usually once a week, what you shot, you show story reels to Disney. And of course, Tim's been looking at everything all along. He sees it first. And Jeffrey Katzenberg, who was still at Disney back in those days as kind of head of animation, he would send me a note or two. And I asked him and said, “Well, what am I supposed to do with this note?”

And he said, “If you like it, use it. And if you don't, you can ignore it.” And I just thought that's how the rest of my life would be, if I ever got to make another film! (*Chuckles.*) And it's only been like that one other movie and partly that way on a few of the films.

[01:05:00]

But those two things gave me the sense of freedom that, okay, it's a gift for Tim. They don't really care that much about it, as long as we keep the budget where it's supposed to be. And that I'll listen to their notes, but I can ignore them. That made us—it made me fearless, and that kind of spread to everyone on the show. Everyone making the show felt the sense “let's make something incredible, crazy, interesting; let's give it our all on every single element of the project”. You know, I don't—I make a habit of not watching it too often, so sometimes it can be three years, five years.

Something a lot of symphonies do to make money is they'll play a score live to a film being projected. Danny Elfman has a second career of performing with a symphony, live singing the part of Jack. So, the last time I saw the film was a few years ago. I was amazed how weird it is.

(*Jesse laughs.*)

I can't—I can't—I just can't believe it! It's insane. But over the years, people grew to love it. You know, we had a small success initially. I felt, well, there's probably too many songs for the general public. It's a little to this, a little to that. And then it started to come back and grow and become something else entirely. So, I'm really happy that it's had this long life. You know, to work hard on something that actually lives beyond its initial moment is—you know, it's a wonderful thing.

(*Chuckling.*) But yeah, I remember, we had a screening for this guy, Michael Eisner. He was the head of Disney at the time! He just sits by himself with a giant-sized popcorn, watching the film, munching. And you know, the film's over and he just goes like that.

Jesse Thorn: “I don't know!”

Henry Selick: Yeah, and then they release it as a Touchstone film. They had an alternate label. But as the years went by, they realized—mainly from merchandising—there was a desire for more and more stuff from *Nightmare*. People were getting tattoos. People were making their own costumes. So, ten years later, it became Disney's Tim Burton's *Nightmare Before Christmas*. They embraced it fully. Look, they were worried it would tarnish their brand, so they didn't put the Disney name. But it actually expanded their brand.

Music: “What's This?” from *The Nightmare Before Christmas*.

What's this? What's this?

There's something very wrong

What's this?

There's people singing songs

What's this?

The streets are lined with little creatures laughing

Everybody seems so happy

Have I possibly gone daffy? What is this?

What's this?

There's children throwing snowballs instead of throwing heads

They're busy building toys and absolutely no one's dead

There's frost on every window, oh, I can't believe my eyes

And in my bones I feel the warmth that's coming from inside

Oh look, what's this?

They're hanging mistletoe, they kiss?

Why that looks so unique?

Inspired

They're gathering around to hear a story roasting chestnuts on a fire

What's this?

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: Did you think you were making a holiday film?

Henry Selick: Yeah, always felt it was a holiday film, and it was fun that Tim had combined Halloween and Christmas. That crossover, visually certainly, was a lot of fun. And also, you know, it had this opportunity to be both—to serve both those holidays and sort of overlap Thanksgiving.

Jesse Thorn: I guess there are probably 4th of July movies, but the two biggest types of seasonal movies—as far as I'm concerned—are Christmas movies and spooky Halloween movies. And you managed to build a crossover success. It's a two-quadrant film!

Henry Selick: Yeah. I mean, over the years, people have asked forever and ever, “Is it a Halloween movie? Is it a Christmas movie?” No, it's really—it's both those things. It's not one over the other.

Jesse Thorn: Do you have a preference?

Henry Selick: Well, visually I've always loved Halloween more. But you know, I was raised with Christmas in my life. So, the excitement when you're little of, you know, desire for the presents and anticipation is huge. But the dress up aspect of Halloween, I always loved. I love the idea that kids could dress up as something they might even be afraid of and own it and transform themselves.

[01:10:00]

It's very, very appealing.

Jesse Thorn: I'll tell ya. I was in Charlottesville, Virginia, on Halloween this past year. And I was on tour with my friend, John Hodgman, who was in your film *Coraline*.

Henry Selick: Oh, Hodgman's wonderful. I love that guy.

Jesse Thorn: One of the best guys. And we were walking down the sort of promenade in Charlottesville. It's Halloween. And Hodgman pointed down the road and said, “Look, there's a Coraline! I see so many Coralines these days.”

And I'm like, “I'm going to go talk to this Coraline.” Hodgman was embarrassed. I'm like, “I'm going to go talk to this Coraline, because how many times am I going to get to talk to somebody dressed up in a costume for a movie my friend was in, and my friend is sitting or standing right next to me?” I went up to her. I couldn't even get her attention. (*Chuckling.*) She was Halloweened out. She immediately switched to a different Halloween gear. I was like, “I don't know; I'm not going to take step two on this process.”

But it occurred to me that as the material culture and sort of the cultural elements that are beyond the bounds of the film of *Nightmare Before Christmas* have expanded over the past 30 years—which they have so much—like it's as much an idea as it is a film now, or a set of aesthetic values, or you know, all these things. It must be crazy for you to be walking down the street on Halloween, and there's a, you know, 25-foot Home Depot Jack Skellington on someone's front yard or something.

Henry Selick: It's astonishing! But yeah, it has—it's just very much a part of Halloween now. It's like that's one of the top four or five images for Halloween, at least in this country. And when it was beginning, it was more wonderful to see that happen, where people were making their own. I knew this guy; he did a giant—welded his own Jack Skellington to put on top of

his chimney. From that, you know, 25 years ago, to the Home Depot Jack Skellingtons! (*Laughing.*) Which are really well built! And they're—I don't know—like \$300, at least. Just seeing those around town, it's an amazing journey.

Jesse Thorn: There's also a wonderful cultural specificity to it. I see two lanes. One is Disney goth, which is a category that I don't know—it must have been nascent 30 years ago but has certainly become ascendant. People at Disneyland having goth day and so forth. And the other—and it might just be because I live in Los Angeles, where there are so many Latinos and especially Chicanos. But it feels like the number one cultural subcategory of a Latino 20-year-old walking down my street is *Nightmare Before Christmas* guy. Or lady. And like, what a neat thing! (*Chuckles.*)

Henry Selick: I believe it. Even on initial release, we did really well in Mexico. But all sorts of people have taken it upon themselves. I mean, you—some time ago I started doing sort of like a collection, mainly online searches, but sometimes people I've met—of tattoos of *Nightmare*. And then now there's as many of *Coraline* characters. And now there's mashups between those two films in tattoos. And sometimes they'll have *Snow White* in there! It's like people—that's one of the things I do love. That they repurpose, they edit other people's work and make it their own. But you know, getting a tattoo is a serious commitment to something. I've even—I signed someone's leg! (*Laughing.*) They wanted a tattoo of my signature, um. They're, you know, a big *Nightmare* fan.

Music: “Town Meeting Song” from *The Nightmare Before Christmas*.

[JACK]

This is a thing called a present

The whole thing starts with a box

[CHORUS]

A box?

is it steel?

Are there locks?

Is it filled with a pox?

A pox!

How delightful, a pox

[JACK]

If you please

Just a box with bright-colored paper

And the whole thing's topped with a bow!

[CHORUS]

A bow?

But why?

How ugly!

What's in it?

What's in it?

[JACK]

That's the point of the thing, not to know

[CHORUS]

It's a bat

Will it bend?

It's a rat

Will it break?

Perhaps it's the head that I found in the lake!

[JACK]

Listen now, you don't understand

That's not the point of Christmas Land

(Music fades out.)

[01:15:00]

Jesse Thorn: What's the best Christmas gift you ever got?

Henry Selick: Oh! *(Stammering.)* I don't—it's impossible for me to answer. It's just something—I haven't thought about it.

Jesse Thorn: What's the best Halloween costume you ever had?

Henry Selick: I was pretty good at the Halloween costumes. Especially when I was, you know, an older teen and so forth. I made myself into a hammer-head. I constructed this huge hammer head and wore that. It was kind of striking. I could kind of conk people on the head, and no one knew who it was.

Jesse Thorn: When you say hammerhead, you're not talking about the shark. You mean that you built the head of a hammer to put over your own head.

Henry Selick: Yeah, a claw, a claw hammer. You know, two things in the back and the hitting part in front. That was a good one.

Jesse Thorn: Was there a reason you chose that?

Henry Selick: No, just you know, running out of time. What am I going to make this year? What am I going to do this year? And I never was someone who wanted to buy a costume or something else. I also—as a kid, I liked being a witch. It didn't occur to me that, oh, witches are supposed to be female or something. That didn't cross my mind. So, homemade witch costumes were some of my favorites as well.

Jesse Thorn: Do you celebrate Christmas now? Do you have a Christmas tree in your house?

Henry Selick: Yeah, we haven't put it up yet. My wife always likes waiting, 'cause they turn brown. I say, "Well, it's the same trees. It's not a younger tree you're getting."

She's like, "Yeah, yeah, but it's outside, so it's cooler now." But yeah, we're gonna get it. And my two grown sons who live in Portland, they'll come down, and relatives will come over

and so forth. Yeah, we have a celebration. And I don't know, we play piano, and we sing some songs. Hardly any Christmas songs.

Jesse Thorn: Well, Henry Selick, I sure appreciate you taking the time to talk to me. It was really great to get to talk to you.

Henry Selick: It was great to see you again (*chuckles*) after 15 years. Real pleasure.

Jesse Thorn: Real pleasure. Henry Selick, everyone. As we said before, *The Nightmare Before Christmas* turns 30 this year. There are lots of events around it, including many theater screenings of the film. If you want to watch it at home, you can rent, stream, or buy it pretty much anywhere. It's a joy.

Transition: Thumpy synth with festive jingle bells.

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. Here at my house, no one would go to the Christmas parade with me. I just wanted to go to the Christmas parade. Gee whiz.

The show's 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 by DJW, also known as Dan Wally. Our theme song is called "Huddle Formation". It was written and recorded by The Go! Team. Thanks to them and Memphis Industries, their label.

Bullseye is on Instagram, where we share highlights from interviews, looks behind the scenes, and more. We are [@BullseyeWithJesseThorn](#) there. We're also on Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook. And I think that's about it. Just remember, all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

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

Jesse Thorn: (*Mumbling the tune of "Carol of the Bells" Mykola Leontovych as bells jingle frantically.*) Yeah, we should just put sleigh bells behind this. (*Chuckles.*) Okay. I'm ready.

(ADVERTISEMENT)

[01:20:00]