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(ADVERTISEMENT)

Transition: Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.

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

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: It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. Jo Firestone is a standup comic, writer, and actor. She wrote on *The Tonight Show*. She also wrote on and had a wonderful part on one of my favorite TV shows of all time, *Joe Pera Talks With You*. She played Sarah, Joe's girlfriend. Sarah is a music teacher and also a somewhat paranoid survivalist with a keen knowledge of which plants you can and cannot eat.

Transition: Music swells then fades.

Clip:

Sarah (*Joe Pera Talks With You*): So, take—lawn grass contains a high level of silica, which definitely eats away at tooth enamel. Still, I'd take it over kale.

Transition: Music swells then fades.

Jesse Thorn: Earlier this year, Jo got a pretty great gig. She's the head writer of *After Midnight*, a combination game show and talk show that follows *The Tonight Show* on CBS. It's hosted by the very funny Taylor Tomlinson.

Transition: Music swells then fades.

Clip:

Taylor Tomlinson (*After Midnight*): Welcome to *After Midnight*, where we make a game show out of the Internet. And just like most things on the Internet, even if you win, you still lose.

(Audience laughs.)

Comedians, you'll be competing for the grand prize of... these ketchup packets I've been keeping in my fridge!

(Cheers and applause.)

Some are from the early 2000s!

Transition: Music swells then fades.

Jesse Thorn: When I talked with Jo back in 2021, she'd just come out with a special called *Great Timing*. Here's how it got made. Jo was living in New York, and she was sort of in between gigs. So, she started teaching a class on how to do standup comedy. Her students—there were about 16 of them—were members of the Greenwich House Senior Center in New York City. Their average age—and this is a guess—was maybe 70ish. Then the pandemic happened. But rather than shut down the class, they moved to video chat. And every morning at 10AM, Jo and these 16 seniors explored what it meant to be funny. Like many comedy classes, it all ended in a recital—a very funny recital that I am pleased to report we all get to see in the special.

Good Timing shows you the comedy that Jo's students came up with. It also features interviews between Jo and the students and behind-the-scenes footage from the classes. Like in this scene, where Jo is leading her students in a little warm up exercise.

Transition: Music swells then fades.

Clip:

Music: Cheerful, quirky piano.

Jo Firestone (*Good Timing*): I'm just gonna say words and you just say whether it's funny or not funny, by itself. Okay? Ready? Peanuts.

The Class: Funny!

Speaker 1: Funny, salt!

Jo: (*Giggles.*) Okay, how about treadmills?

Speaker 2: Not at all.

Speaker 1: Very serious.

(*Laughs.*)

Jo: Gerbils?

Speaker 3: Gerbils?!

Speaker 4: Definitely funny.

Jo: Gerbils are funny?

Speaker 5: With Richard Gear.

Jo: *(Laughs.)*

Speaker 5: I'm sorry! I can't help it.

Jo: How about Band-Aids?

Speaker 6: I loved them when I was a kid. I used to put them on all the time. I loved them. *(Cackles.)* I really did.

(Laughter.)

Speaker 7: And they were hilarious.

Jo: Pumpkins!

Speaker 4: I don't think so.

Jo: Pumpkins are not funny.

Speaker 4: Neutral.

Jo: Pumpkins are neutral.

Speaker 8: Neutral, yeah.

Jo: Okay, what about ghosts?

Speaker 8: Boats? Boat, solo?

Speaker 9: Goats?

Speaker 8: Oh, the greatest of all time.

Jo: No, ghosts.

Speaker 8: Goats? G-O-A-T-S?

Jo: No, ghosts.

Speaker 9: Goats are funny!

Speaker 7: Honey, have you seen my goat?

Transition: Music swells then fades.

Jesse Thorn: *(Chuckles.)* Jo Firestone, welcome to *Bullseye*. It's nice to see you.

Jo Firestone: Yeah, you too.

Jesse Thorn: Okay, so how did you come to start teaching Zoom comedy classes to groups of elderly persons?

Jo Firestone: Well, I had some downtime with my comedy career, and I had just moved to this new neighborhood. And I was like, well, you know, I've taught before. So, I was like maybe I'll start a class. And this was right before—this was about maybe a month or so before the pandemic hit. And so, I started a class. I got two or three classes in, and then they called it, and they said, “Everybody go home.” And then we started up the Zoom. And ever since then, every Monday at 10AM, we've been plugging away at learning the art of comedy.

Jesse Thorn: Was the original intent of the class to try comedy in your retirement or something along those lines, or is that just how it ended up?

Jo Firestone: Well, it was at a senior center.

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It was with the Greenwich House Senior Center, and so I guess it did cater to a certain demographic, age wise.

(Jesse agrees with a chuckle.)

And most of them are retired. Some of them are still working. But yeah, I think that most of them had not tried comedy before in their lives, and they decided that this was the time to start.

Jesse Thorn: Had you taught standup comedy before?

Jo Firestone: Yeah, I taught comedy. Like, I did a comedy class for a couple years at Kings County Hospital in this—they're like—I guess it was like the mental health outpatient center. And then I've taught classes like for teens. And I also taught a different class in Albuquerque for seniors during the pandemic. So, yeah, I've been definitely busy with, you know, the “if you can't do, teach” kind of thing. Yep.

Jesse Thorn: I mean, there are comics who like sincerely despise the idea of teaching standup comedy, that it is like a thing that can be taught. There are many comics who believe in their hearts that standup comedy is something that can only be learned through suffering. Through onstage suffering. *(Laughs.)*

Jo Firestone: Yeah, I—listen, I'm not—here's the thing is I'm not claiming to teach standup comedy. I don't even know how to do it myself, and I've been doing it for like 12 years or something. I don't know how to do it. I think what I'm teaching is confidence and trying to be comfortable with yourself enough to say literally whatever you're thinking. And usually, that's pretty funny.

Jesse Thorn: Were you always confident enough, yourself, to feel like you belonged going up on a standup stage?

Jo Firestone: Absolutely not! I'm still working on it with these guys. It's really—and I think, especially with the pandemic, I didn't get on stage for a very long time. Like, I didn't really do the Zoom shows either. So, it was kind of like relearning to do it once the vaccine came out. And that was—yeah, it was kind of like we were kind of all on the same timeline a little bit.

Jesse Thorn: Why did you think you could do it at the very beginning?

Jo Firestone: When I first started?

Jesse Thorn: Yeah. That, by the way, sounds like more of a challenge than I meant for it to sound like. I don't mean to suggest that you shouldn't have thought you could do it.

Jo Firestone: (*Chuckles.*) You know, I don't know. I think I was kind of delusional. I think there was like—I think that I didn't realize what it took. And that's why I was like, “I can do it!” Is like I didn't realize that you're just repeating the same like 10 minutes every night or you're—you know, you're trying to become a brand or whatever. I didn't realize any of that. I just kind of thought, oh, you just make people laugh. That seems fun. And then I didn't even really start doing standup comedy until a few years in. I was just doing kind of weird shows for whoever stopped by.

Jesse Thorn: (*Laughs.*) What does that mean, Jo?

Jo Firestone: I would just do—I couldn't figure out how to get audiences to come to a show in New York. And I was like, well, the only way to get an audience is getting a celebrity—and that's out of the question—or offering free pizza. And so, a lot of the shows would like offer free pizza or kind of surround around the idea of free pizza and like participation and kind of just like giving you an experience so that you'd show up and at least remember what you experienced.

Jesse Thorn: Can you give me an example of a free pizza themed show premise?

Jo Firestone: Yeah, okay, so like one time I was like, oh, I know what'll get people in the door. And so, I hung up a bunch of like inflatables and paper mâché and just let people hit at them for six hours until they were all kind of a pulp.

(*Jesse laughs.*)

And that was the show, I guess.

Jesse Thorn: Wait, did you say six hours?!

Jo Firestone: Yeah, six hours. I think it was from 11 to 5. Mm-hm.

Jesse Thorn: (*Laughs.*) That was so they could clean up before the dinner rush?

Jo Firestone: (*Laughs.*) Yeah. Yeah, there was a lot of stuff like that where you like—there was one called *Last to Leave*, and it was another six-hour experience where you had to sit through the most boring six-hour long comedy show. You weren't allowed to check your phone or go to the bathroom, because then you wouldn't win the grand prize at the end, which was \$100. And it came down to two people at the very end who were lasting it through. And finally—it looked like we announced a winner, 'cause the other guy went up like to almost leave. And so, we announced the one winner. And so, we were all like championing him and like carrying him on our shoulders. And then we all started carrying him towards the door, and that's when he realized he wouldn't be the last to leave. So, he started clawing at the walls, like trying to get back into theater. And the other guy realized he was gonna win, and then the other guy did win.

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And it was pretty brutal.

Jesse Thorn: (*Cackles.*) I've always known you were heartless, Jo.

(*Jo agrees with an embarrassed laugh.*)

This is a new level of darkness for you.

Jo Firestone: Yeah, yeah, it's true. It's kind of a Joker-style comedy approach.

Jesse Thorn: So, I've seen you do what could be described as concept stage shows more than traditional standup, but you do do traditional standup. What were your experiences like the first times you were doing a set on a standup show? You know, in whatever is the closest you were getting to like standing in front of a brick wall and, you know, going on after Colin Quinn or whatever. Like, what was that like for you when you went from your papier mâché based material to that?

(*They chuckle.*)

Jo Firestone: You know, I think that at times I really did want to be more of a traditional standup. Like, I remember one time going up right before Hannibal Buress. And I just remember thinking like, “I wish I could do what he did. Like, I wish I had those skills to just kind of stand there and just deliver jokes.” And I just couldn't. And so, I kind of just did whatever I knew how to—knew what to do, which was like kind of crowd work and causing a little bit of chaos. And that seemed to work for who I am and how I presented. And I kind of slowly came to accept it. It's like, this is what my brain does. So, this is kind of what I can do.

Jesse Thorn: What do you teach in comedy classes when you are working with teens or folks who are at a mental health center or folks at a senior center? What are like the concrete things that you do with people?

Jo Firestone: Well, I'm not going to teach teens anymore. I'm too afraid of them. So, we've kind of ended that.

(Jesse laughs.)

But it's basically—the class, I think, is just figuring out what the people you're teaching like to talk about, what gets them excited to talk about it, and what do they have a lot of opinions about? And then just like creating activities and exercises where they can talk about that stuff a lot.

Jesse Thorn: I took a class at San Francisco State when I was in high school that had one class day that was standup comedy workshop day. And a guy came in who taught standup comedy workshops fulltime, professionally, in San Francisco. And the main thing I remember him talking about is something that is featured in your special, *Good Timing*, which is taking the microphone off the microphone stand appropriately. He's like, “This is so important! Put your foot on the bass and pull the microphone out with authority.” He's like, “Adjust it to your height and pull the mic out with authority.”

Jo Firestone: *(Giggles.)* It's a huge logistical thing you don't really think about until it's too late. And not everybody's touched a microphone before, and that's—you know, I learned that doing the special. And that was—I think that is key. That's your only equipment that you have to be in charge of. And so, yeah, that lesson didn't come up before when we were on Zoom, so this was definitely an in-person aspect to the class.

Jesse Thorn: So, when you started this class, what was the first thing that you had people do?

Jo Firestone: Mm. Oh, uh, this was really misguided, but basically I thought it'd be really funny for everybody to go around and say their name and say what they wanted their stage name to be. And that was like I think a little bit too left field. That was like—they were kind of weirded out by that. But then recently, one of the people who was there on the first day of the class and is still taking the class, Bibby, she like wrote a letter about what the class meant to her. And she was talking about how the first day she saw me, and she thought I was very young. Really, really young. *(Chuckles.)* So, she put “very” in parentheses. So, I think that maybe I have learned a lot about kind of facilitating this class through their reactions. Sometimes I'll lead activities, and they'll just kind of stare at me, or they'll begrudgingly do it. But I've learned like certain things get a lot more response than others.

Jesse Thorn: So, what's something that works?

Jo Firestone: Okay, so a big thing that works is anything having to do with New York infrastructure improving.

(Jesse erupts into laughter.)

So, I'll be like, “How do you make the airport better? Or like, what's wrong with the subway?”

Jesse Thorn: All your best material comes from the power broker.

[00:15:00]

Jo Firestone: Yes! (*Laughs.*) Yes, essentially it's a—everybody in the class is a protégé of Jane Jacobs. It's like there's a lot of—people obviously have lived in New York City for a really long time, so they all think about New York City a lot. Like, recently, the assignment was to create a new flag for the city of New York, and some people did some really inventive stuff. I mean, they had more Photoshop skills than I knew what to do with. And actually, Bibby—Bibby did this. Bibby, she had printed out a picture of boars. And she goes, “Well, the flag would involve The Five Boars.”

And then you're like the fire boar—? Oh my gosh, this is a pun! And then she's like, “And obviously, New York is known for its—” And then she held up like a virus, like a spore, and she goes, “Obviously, New York is known for its pox. Washington Square Pox (*park, in a New York accent.*)” Like, it was incredible, “Prospect Pox (*park.*)” And she just—I was kind of amazed by what she did. She's like, “It's known for its subways.” And then she held up a piece of paper that just had a bunch of Subway restaurants printed out on it. I was like this is beyond what I'd ever expect or be capable of.

Jesse Thorn: What did you think that teaching specifically at a senior center would be like, having had a variety of different experiences teaching comedy in different places? And how did what actually happen compare to that?

Jo Firestone: I think I was hoping—'cause I think at the time that I started teaching—again, I was kind of getting a little bit jaded, and I really try not to be bitter about comedy. I think it's like—it kind of kills your soul if you start to feel bitter. And so, I really was trying not to do that. And I think I was sensing at that time in my life I was feeling a little bit more bitter and jaded with the industry. And I was like hoping to connect with some people that maybe just wanted to do this to enjoy comedy and to enjoy making jokes and laughing and not necessarily like compete with each other for very limited career opportunities.

And then it turned out like—you know, I think that that was what I was like thinking going into it. But like, it turns out that all of these people are very unique and very—like, they have very different motivations for taking the class, and they—like, I think they all get something out of it. They obviously keep coming, but I think they all get different things out of it, and they have different—I think some of them want to pursue comedy more directly. Some of them are happy with what level of engagement they're in. But it's—I think with any group of people, you go in thinking one thing, and then you come out, and you're like, oh, these are just individuals that happen to all be together on Mondays.

Jesse Thorn: I thought it was so interesting to hear the different places that the people performing in this special were coming from. And I don't mean geographical places, but you know, there's one guy who's a semiprofessional comic. You know, there's one guy who's done standup. There's some people who have backgrounds in other performing arts—actors and musicians. And then there's—you know, there's people who say, “Well, I always liked making jokes in elementary school.” Which, you know, when you're 75 is—you know. There's a little bit of distance there.

(Jo agrees.)

And I wonder if you notice the differences in the ways that those people who have those different backgrounds approached this sort of weird, sui generis performance type that is standup comedy.

Jo Firestone: I think that the people that maybe had done it before were—'cause this was like our first live, in-person show. So, just in terms of the special, the people that had like a background in acting or singing or like comedy were a little bit less nervous. And this was like not—this was a pretty low stakes situation. This was like 2PM. There were maybe like 30 people in the audience, and they were all like—they're very supportive people that like were friends of the people that made the special. And—

Jesse Thorn: Hold on, Jo. You say it was a low stakes situation. But you are talking about people doing comedy for the first time in front of television cameras. *(Laughs.)*

Jo Firestone: True. There were, eeh, six cameras. Yeah. And—yeah, backstage and in front of the stage for sure. Bright lights. Yeah. Big city, that kind of thing. So, yeah, I guess there were—let's go ahead and say 75% stakes. And I think that the people—like, one person, she really was nervous. She had not done comedy live before ever.

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And she like was pretty terrified of it, and I could tell that I was kind of asking her to do something that she wasn't quite comfortable with. And so, I offhandedly was like, “Alright, if you do the show, I'll take you out for drinks. Okay?”

And she was like, “Okay.” And then like every week since then, she was like, “Where are the drinks? When are the drinks coming?” *(Laughs.)* And so, I did take her out for drinks recently, and she was like, “Okay, it's worth it. It's worth it.” But yeah, I definitely had some incentive plans for a few of them.

Jesse Thorn: My son recently started playing Little League. And it occurred to me that his coach, who's a very sweet man, has to send these kids—none of whom know what they're doing, really—out to positions on the field, and he has to assign them slots in the batting order. And he has to decide some mix of what will work and like what will be most comfortable for everyone and like what will be the most fun for everyone. And one of the things that I got really anxious about/interested in was how you decide who to send up first and last on—*(laughs)*.

Jo Firestone: Great question, great question, yeah.

Jesse Thorn: So—because that's really a big deal in standup. It's really a big deal. So, how do you decide which of this group of people from your Zoom comedy class you send up first and last and in what order in between?

Jo Firestone: Well, I put this guy, Tom Padovano, up first. Because he's been doing comedy for the last I think 30 years, on and off. He works in HR, but he does standup comedy. And I had a feeling that he's gone up first before. And so, I thought, you know, I'm gonna put him up first. I know he'll do good.

Jesse Thorn: He's got energy. He's bringing energy. He's got some gags he knows works.

Jo Firestone: Yeah, he's got a lot of energy. Yeah, strong punchlines. He's gonna set the show off right. And then I thought this other guy who does a little bit of comedy—Zygy, Zygy Susser. I thought he would be a good closer. He's—you know, he does a lot of jokes about his bird, and I thought that's a way to end it, you know, is with some bird jokes. And—

Jesse Thorn: (*Laughs.*) Never follow a kid, and always close with a bird gag. It's old vaudeville.

Jo Firestone: Yeah. That's pretty much taken right from the vaudeville books is, yeah, don't—yeah, never follow a bird. And yeah, it turned out pretty good. They were telling me after the show that they would like to open and close shows like that all the time. They think they make a pretty good sandwich.

Jesse Thorn: (*Laughs.*) So, how do you decide where to put the 70-year-old man who's decided to perform in sneakers, pasties, and bikini briefs?

Jo Firestone: Well, I didn't know that was what he was going to do. That was a surprise for everyone!

(*Jesse cackles.*)

And I just thought he was wearing a robe. And I know—the only thing that kind of tipped me off is that he was having these long conversations with the sound people. Like, in a way that I was like what is going on over there? Like, they were like looking at him and like—'cause he didn't have anywhere to put the mic pack, you know? And so, I think that was the delay. But I really had no idea that that was what was going to happen. And that definitely spiced up the whole afternoon for everybody. That was kind of a good surprise that nobody saw coming.

Jesse Thorn: Even more with Jo Firestone after the break. Stay with us. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

(*ADVERTISEMENT*)

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Transition: Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

Jesse Thorn: It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is Jo Firestone. She is currently the head writer on the brand-new late-night show, *After Midnight*. She's also an actor and standup

comic. She starred alongside Joe Pera in the excellent show *Joe Pera Talks With You*. When Jo and I talked in 2021, she'd just put out her special *Good Timing*. It's a standup special, but not in the traditional sense. It's a documentary about Jo teaching a bunch of seniors how to do comedy. You can stream it now on Peacock. Let's get back into our conversation.

There is a popular trope in internet videos, which is old people doing jokes. It's great. It's very fun. Jokes are funny. Like, joke-jokes. Street jokes. That's a very fun thing to see. And you know, some of the folks in your classes are really great joke tellers and know a lot of jokes. And I'm like, oh yeah, jokes are great. One of the things I liked most was seeing people who weren't used to representing themselves on stage in this way representing things that are actually sincerely personal to them. I mean, I think that those bird gags are interesting and funny because your man Zygy really has a lot of perspective on this bird. Like, he really loves this bird and thinks about it a lot. You know what I mean?

(They chuckle.)

Like, that's why it's funny. And that's true of a lot of standup. How do you get people who haven't been performers but have this wealth of life experience to share things that are true and special to themselves—instead of, or maybe in addition to, telling the best party joke they've ever heard?

Jo Firestone: What I tried to do for the show—and some of this made it in the cut, but what I tried to tell them was to like basically think about the stuff that they think about a lot. And so, basically I had them go through and like each list five things that they think about all the time and to kind of try to write jokes about one or multiple of those things. And I think also what helped was the time limit. 'Cause they had four minutes tops. And so, I think that like maybe you'd want to like tell a story from your life, but how do you make it short? If you only have four minutes, then you have to kind of only stick to the funny parts. Or if you want to do kind of a strange concept, how do you make it—if this is what's in your brain and you think this is what I really want to do, how do you make it a four-minute bit? The one thing that I'm—ugh, I'm so sad it didn't make the cut, but one of the people in the class, Teresa, had this bit about a new product called Wonder Wicky Wipes, I think. And it was a new product she invented because her eyelids sweat so much. And it was—

(Jesse cackles.)

It was like this really—like, she had a prop. She made a prop. It was a whole thing, and it was very—it was based on this personal thing where she's like, “I sweat from my eyelids. How do I make that a joke?” And she did!

Jesse Thorn: I mean, you expect when you say to a group of senior citizen New Yorkers who are taking a comedy class to write down five things that they really think about a lot—you expect a couple of them to write down pastrami sandwich, *(laughing)* but you don't necessarily expect one of them to say eyelid sweat.

Jo Firestone: Yeah, that's the thing is that a lot of times—I think also they know that like surprising people or, you know, saying something that like is completely out of the blue, it makes the other people in the class laugh a lot. And so, I think that they kind of try to say

things that the other people don't expect, and I think that kind of makes everybody feel—you know, they're kind of excited to hear what everyone's going to say, because I think all of them are like, “What's the next person going to say? I have no idea.”

Jesse Thorn: Do you think that they had expectations of you when they signed up for this class?

Jo Firestone: Well, I will say that like I'm a little bit unstructured, and I know that a lot of them would prefer more criticism. And I'm just not—I'm not interested in doing that.

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But I also think that like at one point—I've had a few people come in and be guests, like teach their style of comedy. And at one point I had my boyfriend come in, and he used to work at *The Onion*, and he like made up like the whole syllabus and like examples and like literally how to write *Onion* headlines. And people were so into that. Like, I think the week afterwards, they were just like, “Oh, this is what—you really are not teaching us anything.” And like they kept asking for my boyfriend to come back. And they kept being like—whenever I was like, “Oh, I can't be there this week,” they'd be like, (*excitedly*) “Could the boyfriend substitute?!”

(*Jesse laughs.*)

And yeah, definitely I'm not like the strongest, most structured teacher. But they seemed to accept me anyways.

Jesse Thorn: Have the students seen you perform?

Jo Firestone: Yeah, unfortunately, yes. Yeah, a few of them found out I do a weekly show, and they showed up to it once. And one of them actually heckled, which was—

(*Jesse cackles.*)

Uhh, it was interesting.

Jesse Thorn: I have a buddy who does sketch comedy and is a psychiatrist and works with—primarily with like residential, hospitalized patients. So, people who have very serious issues. And he told me one time, he's like, “I just have to do everything I can to make sure that they don't know I do comedy.”

(*They laugh.*)

It's like, “I can't imagine what effect it would have on them should they learn. It is so important that I care for these people. And that is why they must never know.”

Jo Firestone: Yeah, I did think—like, when they came to the show, I was like this is going to be so disappointing. Like, they've been like showing up week after week, and now they're like, “This is who we're learning from? Oh no.” So, I was a little bit afraid of that, but then—once I got heckled—I was like, well, I guess this is what it is. They can't—yeah. But sometimes they've like found my videos or watched like shows I've been in and then they—you know, they're pretty good at snooping and online and detective work.

Jesse Thorn: I mean, I was imagining them being confused or disappointed that you weren't as syllabus-focused and driven as you could have been and then like listening to, for example, your podcast that's in our mutual podcast network—which is a game show where listeners call in and make the rules of the game that is the most shambolic, insane—*(laughs)*. Like, almost invariably the joke becomes how awkward and uncomfortable can we make Jo, specifically? Even your cohost, Manolo, tends to stick you like a matador and a bull whenever possible. *(Laughs.)* Like, this is your native habitat is to be in that state. Harried, confused, and doing crowd work.

Jo Firestone: *(Laughs.)* Yeah. So, I can't expect them to think—like, to hope for otherwise. I guess that's kind of the comfort; that's what I'm falling back on.

Jesse Thorn: I mean, it's funny that that is what you so often do and the thing that is such a gift that you have. And it really is an incredible gift that you have. I mean, like if I think of standup comics I know who present the way you do—which is to say, maybe a little retiring, a little nervous, you know, that kind of thing—I think of the person that I think is probably the best standup comic, Maria Bamford. And Maria responds to being that way—which she is in real life to some extent. I mean, all standup comedy personas are personae, but like she is like that. She responds to that by being the most meticulous comedy writer of any comic I've ever known. She's extraordinarily meticulous and terrified to engage the crowd directly. She does these days, but it took her 20 years of doing standup or something to do that. Your response to that same like at least way of presenting to the audience was just to dive in. Just dive straight into it and be like, “Let's do this together, gang.”

Jo Firestone: Yeah, I don't—it doesn't make sense to me either. I really—I wish I was meticulous or—

(Jesse laughs.)

[00:35:00]

Yeah, it does seem like Maria has chosen the right path for sure. But yeah, that's—yeah, I think one time my mom saw me perform for the—like, she like hadn't seen me perform in a while. She lives in St. Louis, and she was like in New York, and she's like, “It's so interesting! You seem both confident and scared!”

(Jesse laughs.)

And I thought I guess that's—I guess that's kind of what I'm going for, yeah.

Jesse Thorn: You mentioned the folks in your class having seen you on TV. You're a writer, producer, and actor on a show called *Joe Pera Talks With You*.

(*Jo confirms.*)

Which I truly think is one of the best shows on television. I think it's such a brilliant and amazing television show.

Jo Firestone: Glad you like it!

Jesse Thorn: I do. I really love it, Jo. And Joe Pera, the star of the show, is a quiet, gentle man from Buffalo who talks slowly and carefully in a very steady and low tone. And the premise of the show is that he is something like him—living in Michigan instead of Buffalo, but a frozen wasteland either way—and he's a sweet middle school teacher. And it's sort of like—it's a little bit like Huell Howser or another one of these kind of like public television talk-to-the-camera shows, but it's also a kind of slice-of-life sitcom. It kind of lives between those worlds. And your character is his—works at the same school as he does and is his friend and sometimes girlfriend on the show. And—

Well, I want to play a clip from the show. Your character, Jo, is named Sarah. And she is both a mousy middle school music teacher and a very intense prepper—someone who deals with their anxiety by having just an extraordinary collection of canned goods and related products. And so, in this scene, Joe Pera, has just told Sarah—my guest, Jo Firestone's character—that when he was a kid, he got kicked out of Little League for running around the bases a bunch of times, even though he had already been tagged out.

Transition: Music swells then fades.

Clip:

Music: A meaningful chord fades into quiet.

Joe Pera (*Joe Pera Talks With You*): I know it sounds childish, but it feels so good to get that off of my chest. I guess I was still embarrassed from when Coach Hasler had me turn in my cap and uniform.

Sarah: (*Beat.*) It takes guts for you to tell me that, and I don't fully understand it, but I can respect it.

Joe: Every time we've driven by a diamond, I've held it in.

Sarah: Can I share something with you?

Joe: Sure.

Sarah: I've dated men from each branch of the US military, and I still keep in touch with two of them.

Joe: *(Beat.)* Okay.

Sarah: And we're friends, but it's primarily for intelligence.

Joe: Makes sense.

Transition: Music swells then fades.

Jo Firestone: *(They laugh.)* So stupid.

Jesse Thorn: It's really great. It's so sweet. So, there's only—you know, this is a small show with only a few writers on it. You're one of them.

(Jo confirms.)

Did you have a conversation amongst yourselves about what you were trying to do?

Jo Firestone: Usually, how that show works is Joe will become fascinated with one thing in particular. Like, making a bean arch or—

Jesse Thorn: And making a bean arch was an entire season-long arc on the show.

Jo Firestone: Yeah, he came in one day and was like, “I know what season two will be. Bean arch.”

Jesse Thorn: That's like when you have an arch-shaped trellis or you grow the beans, climbing beans, into an arch shape.

Jo Firestone: Mm-hm. And so, then what the writers do—because we're all friends—is we all kind of like, “Okay, bean arch. Never heard of that before!” And then we all research bean arches, and then basically we all try to figure out—if this is the thing that's really exciting Joe, then we kind of all figure out a way to make the story around this thing that's in real life exciting Joe. Like, I've never seen a man really get that excited about bean arches. Like, even in the show, I think it's muted to what it was in real life.

(Jesse laughs.)

And so, I think that—yeah, kind of is just kind of figuring out like, oh, this is what he's really into right now. Okay, let's kind of figure out a way to make a story around that.

[00:40:00]

And season three is coming out soon. And I think it was kind of like—it gets easier every season. Because it's like, “Oh, well, you know, this character does this and, you know, this character likes this and goes here. And this character is getting older, or this character's on summer break.” And so, you kind of just—the more time you spend in that world, the more

you're like, "Oh, I guess, yeah, this—" It gets a little bit easier to understand where it's gonna go.

Jesse Thorn: It feels like there's a lot in the show that is about these characters—who are some combination of shy, neurodiverse, and maybe Midwestern—learning to be intimate with each other.

Jo Firestone: (*Beat.*) Yeah, I never—yeah, I guess I didn't think about it like that, but yeah. I think that could be clear to any viewer. Yeah.

Jesse Thorn: (*Laughs.*) One of the most distinctive things about the show, obviously, is Joe is just a really distinctive performer, right? Like, he's just—you know, you don't see a lot of guys that look like him and talk like him that do comedy, right?

(*Jo confirms.*)

Or apparently think like him about bean arches, specifically. And there is a—you know, he makes what amount to like comedy ASMR videos, where he just talks about something—interesting information about something over B roll, and those are very popular among people who want to hear a gentle person say interesting but not too interesting things about something nice.

(*They chuckle.*)

You know, they're great. But the thing that really is amazing to me about the show is how profoundly it is about feelings and those kind of feelings of, I think, like intimacy and awe. Like, those are the places where it lives, that is like looking at the face of God—whether it's a bean arch or all the stuff that's available at the grocery store (*laughs*)—and like learning to connect with somebody. And those are scary things to write about in 15 minutes on the Cartoon Network! (*Laughs.*)

Jo Firestone: It's interesting that—I mean, I love that that is what you grasp from it. I think it's like if you saw what we're like to get—it's just a bunch of idiots. Like, we just—like, a few of us went on tour. Connor and Dan and Joe and I went on tour. And it's not like we're big drinkers or anything. And so, the big thing to do would be to go to a new city and then go to the grocery store. And we spent almost all of our time doing that. And I think that's kind of what was inspiration for the grocery store episode. It's like—but I don't know if even we thought about like—you know. I think then we started to be like, "It's kind of disturbing that we do this. Like, maybe we should see the town, like maybe we should do anything else." But we just kept going to the grocery store, spending all of our time there.

And, yeah, I think that—I don't know. I'm glad that something deeper comes out of it. And I think that is a lot to do with, you know, Joe and Marty, the director. And—but yeah, if you see the writers, it's a bunch of people being like, "What if the Pope?" And that's like a pitch, you know. And then you kind of think, okay, well, yeah, what if the Pope?

(*Jesse laughs.*)

And then somehow you get a full episode.

Jesse Thorn: Stick around, more *Bullseye* around the corner from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

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[00:45:00]

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(*Music ends.*)

Transition: Chiming synth with a syncopated beat.

Jesse Thorn: I'm Jesse Thorn. This is *Bullseye*. My guest is comedian and writer Jo Firestone. She's the creator of the comedy special *Great Timing*, in which she teaches a group of seniors how to do standup. She is now the head writer on the CBS late night show *After Midnight*. She's also an actor, writer, and producer on *Joe Pera Talks With You*.

Did you think about what you wanted your character on that show to be, other than, you know, a quiet, mousy counterpart to quiet and mousy Joe Pera's character?

Jo Firestone: I was kind of shocked that I had the part. I was like—when they were like, “Oh yeah, you're going to play this character.” And I was like, what, really? Are you sure? And then the second season, I was like really? Do you really—? You can recast me. I think that probably would be the best thing to do. And yeah, for the third season as well, I said, “If you want to, please recast me. I don't think that I'm right for this part.” But then they kept bringing me back.

But yeah, I think that—I don't know. I think that it's definitely—the first season I did it, I got really into prepping lifestyle, and I got really nervous. And I like bought all this equipment, like wind-up clocks and like water purifiers for my home. And it was just not good. And then I realized between season one and season two that if there's an apocalypse, I'm just going to die. And so, that kind of made me feel better about relating to the character. I was like, oh, okay. I'm just going to—we're going to be separate.

(They laugh.)

Jesse Thorn: Wait, so did your actual life inspire the character's anxieties, or did the character's anxieties inspire those anxieties in your own life?

Jo Firestone: Yeah, the character's anxieties inspired the anxieties in my own. Because I did so much research about it, about prepping. And then it started to be like, well, this makes sense! It seems like the thing to do! And then I—yeah, I just realized I'm not strong enough. I can't be staying alive after people start bringing out, you know, harpoons and stuff. Yeah, I gotta go. I gotta go.

Jesse Thorn: I mean, I feel like if we've learned any lesson from the geopolitical events in the United States of the past five years or so, it's that doing too much research about something on the internet is just inevitably—if you're lucky, it just means you're going to spend too much money on guitars.

(Jo laughs.)

But if you're not lucky, all of a sudden you're wearing a bear's head on top of your own and like climbing to the top of the Washington Monument.

Jo Firestone: Yeah. I mean, this is—yeah, you're right. You're absolutely right. And it's like, at this point, it's like I got a dog. He doesn't even like to go in a bag. There's no chance I'm getting out of New York City. Like, I'm going down and that's fine.

Jesse Thorn: *(Laughs.)* Do you think that you have learned anything about your own work from working with these folks in your class?

Jo Firestone: I think I've learned to be—they're really productive, and like they have a lot of work to show for it at this point. They've been doing assignments every week, and like they come up with a lot of material in the classes, and I think there's been times where I've been kind of slow to make material or to write it all. And the fact that they just keep writing, and they keep making stuff and they're so prolific—it does inspire me to write more and to make more stuff. Because I think if left to my own devices, I would just kind of like panic about a show and just be like, oh, okay, I'll just—yeah, I'll just let the crowd destroy me. And then—yeah. And then—but I think it's really nice to be working on stuff all the time and kind of use your brain in that way.

Jesse Thorn: Do you give yourself the assignments that you give the folks in your class?

Jo Firestone: I don't ever—I don't always do them, but sometimes I just think about like what would I not resent doing if somebody asked me to do it? Like, this was a really good one. I thought this was one of my best assignments yet was to do a patented self-defense move.

(Jesse chuckles.)

And I was like this is going to be good, because we're going to have everybody demonstrating the self-defense moves. It's going to be active. It's going to be great. And this one guy, Al, who was too busy to do the special but he's in the class and he's always talking about—

Jesse Thorn: *(Laughing.)* He was too busy to do the special?

Jo Firestone: He was way too busy. I begged him, but he was too busy.

Jesse Thorn: That's also, by the way, why I've never been in a TV special up until this point.

Jo Firestone: Of course. Everybody's too busy.

[00:50:00]

This guy, he's like this amazing—he's a crooner. He's like this incredible, talented guy, and his favorite thing to joke about—he's been joking about this for almost two years now—is his banana. Washing his banana, keeping his banana hard, making sure it mingles with other bananas. I mean this is the banana guy. Like, people have gotten him banana socks. He's obsessed with his banana, and that's a euphemism. And so, then I was giving examples of what self-defense moves to do. And I was like, so maybe one person can come up with a move where you punch somebody in their banana. And then Bibby, who's in the special, goes, “That would be called a banana split.”

(Jesse laughs.)

And it was like all of this guy's jokes for the whole time paid off in this one moment. It was so glorious.

Jesse Thorn: *(Laughs.)* Well, Jo, it is such a great special. I so enjoyed watching it.

(Jo thanks him.)

And I do so love *Joe Pera Talks With You* as well and your wonderful podcast and your stage work. I'm so grateful to get to work with you, and thanks for making the time to be on *Bullseye*.

Jo Firestone: Thank you for having me. I love this show. And I'm a fan, and I was excited to be asked to be on it. Thank you!

Transition: Cheerful, bouncy synth.

Jesse Thorn: Jo Firestone from 2021. As we mentioned before, she is the head writer on the new CBS late night show *After Midnight*. It's a sort of reboot of the Comedy Central show, *At Midnight*. They're booking great, funny people on the show. It's a comedy game show. I think you'll really enjoy it. It's on late nights on CBS. Jo also hosts an absolutely wonderful podcast that is part of our Maximum Fun network. It's called *Dr. Gameshow*. She and her comically Eeyore-ish cohost Manolo Moreno play games. They're games that are provided to them and typically invented by listeners and are often completely bizarre or impossible or confusing or amazing. Yeah, *Dr. Gameshow*. It's a hoot and a half. You really couldn't have more fun.

(Music fades out.)

Transition: Bright, upbeat synth.

Jesse Thorn: That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye* is created from the homes of me and the staff of Maximum Fun, in and around greater Los Angeles, California. I was actually up at my cabin in the southern Sierras this week, and I watched *Naked Gun 2½*, which is not a great movie. It's an alright movie, but it does have a great part where Leslie Nielsen says, "I've been swimming in raw sewage! I love it."

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. She's on her way out, though. Thank you, Bryanna, for all your hard work. 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. Our thanks to them and to their label, Memphis Industries.

Bullseye is on Instagram, where we share interview highlights and pictures and behind the scenes looks and so forth. We are [@BullseyeWithJesseThorn](#). We are 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.

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