

[00:00:00]

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

**Promo:** *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of [MaximumFun.org](http://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. Quick warning about this interview that you are about to hear, there is a little bit of sex talk in it. Nothing graphic or specifically descriptive, but we wanted to give you a heads up.

Now, if you had to name one writer on *Saturday Night Live*, the show's MVP—or I guess, MVW, Most Valuable Writer—it would probably be Paula Pell. I mean, there's some other options. JackHandy, maybe. But so many of the sketches that Paula Pell wrote are stone cold classics now. There's the Culps, Ana Gasteyer and Will Ferrell's bizarre pop music duo.

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Clip:**

**Music:** “*Groove is in the Heart*” from the album *What is Love?* By Deee-Lite played live on piano.

**Ana:** (*Vocalizing exaggerated riffs.*)

**Ana & Will:** *Groove is in the heart! Groove is in the heaaaart!*

**Will:** *Yeah!*

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Jesse Thorn:** The Spartan Cheerleaders. It goes on, Omeletteville, Tony Bennett. Homocil. Paula Pell left *Saturday Night Live* in 2013. She'd been on the show for 18 years. Since then, she's written for *30 Rock*, the Oscars, the Golden Globes. She's had roles on *Parks and Recreation*, *Big Mouth*, and *AP Bio*. On that last show, she played Helen, the goofy high school administrator who eats tomato sauce and hair. These days, you can see her on *Girls5Eva*, a TV comedy about a reunited '90s girl group. Pell plays Gloria, one of the members of the band.

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Clip:**

**Gloria (*Girls5Eva*):** Shut it down, clown town! Order in the sport court! Time of death—uh, now! Simon says you gotta go to the bus station and get far away from here!

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Jesse Thorn:** *Girls5eva*'s third season just premiered on Netflix, so we're replaying my 2019 interview with Paula. When we talked way back then, she'd just starred in a movie called *Wine Country*. It was sort of a *Saturday Night Live* reunion, along with Paula, it features (*theatrically*) Amy Poehler, Tina Fey, Maya—this is the most half-effort Don Pardo impression ever. (*Dropping the bit.*) Rachel Dratch, Ana Gasteyer.

It tells the story of a group of friends who take a girl's trip to the Napa Valley for a weekend of wine and relaxation. The group became lifelong friends during their time working at a pizza place in Chicago, but people moved and got married, grew apart. *Wine Country* deals with preserving those friendships despite life getting in the way. In this clip, Paula—who plays Val—is having a heart-to-heart with Rachel Dratch's character, Rebecca. Val's worried she just blew a big chance to ask out a bartender.

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Clip:**

**Val (*Wine Country*):** Here's the last thing I sent to her. "I have vintage jade earrings at my store, would love to send them to you." So dumb! She's Jade. You know, she's got like a million jade things. I made a mistake. (*Sighs.*) She's too young for me.

**Rebecca:** Val, may I offer you some feedback?

**Val:** Go for it.

**Rebecca:** Okay, I mean, when it comes to age, the number itself truly doesn't matter. I mean, I wish Abby could understand this, because she's coming at me like, "You're 50! You're 50! You're 50! It's like what matters is how you feel inside. So, with all that in mind, what would you say your soul's age is?"

**Val:** I'd say like 12. I mean, maybe a little older, probably old enough to drink and bone. Maybe 18. 18 and a half. Almost out of the house. Don't have my own car yet, but I have a bike.

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Jesse Thorn:** (*Laughs.*) Paula Pell, welcome to *Bullseye*. It's so great to have you on the show.

**Paula Pell:** Thank you for having me.

**Jesse Thorn:** This movie really feels like—I mean, it's about girls' weekend, but it feels like Old Home Week, given the deep relationships between every single person in the entire production.

**Paula Pell:** Yeah, it's—you know, it's based on an actual trip we took for Rachel Dratch's 50th birthday to Wine Country. We've done two of those trips. I'm still owed mine, because I turned 50 before we started doing the trip. So, we're going to do a retroactive trip for me. But we took Rachel, and so many fun and insane things happened by the end of the weekend. We just kind of—Amy and Emily Spivey, who co-wrote it with Liz Cackowski, they were just like, “I think we need to write this as a movie.” (*Chuckles.*)

**Jesse Thorn:** What was one real thing that really happened on a real trip?

**Paula Pell:** Oh, there's so many real things. Maya got bit, but not by a snake.

[00:05:00]

She got bitten by a black widow spider while she was getting a massage.

**Jesse Thorn:** Oh, wow. Oh, jeez! (*Laughs.*)

**Paula Pell:** And the person was like, “I think that was a black widow.” Like, they thought maybe it was a black widow. And we all came out like super relaxed from our little services we ordered with our robes on, smelling like lavender. And she looked like she was about to die, because she thought she was about to die. The other thing that definitely happened was the night before the actual trip, I went to the Hustler store, on Santa Monica and West Hollywood, and purchased everyone a very high-end dildo. They were actually all vibrators, but sort of phallic vibrators. So, do what you want with them. You know what? It's a closed door. Just do what you want.

(*Jesse laughs.*)

It's America. But I bought so many of them for such high prices—I mean, these were well over one-hundo apiece. The really cool girl behind the counter started looking really sad for me. And she said, “Could I give you my employee discount?”

(*Jesse cackles.*)

And she gave it to me! So, I saved hundreds of dollars on that bouquet of ( *censor beep*). Can I say ( *censor beep*) on here?

**Jesse Thorn:** I mean, probably not! We'll have to ask a man at NPR. A nice man at NPR will tell us.

**Paula Pell:** Alright, alright, alright. Oh, god. Hi, mom. I hope you're listening.

**Jesse Thorn:** Welcome to NPR. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is Paula Pell.

**Paula Pell:** Hi.

**Jesse Thorn:** Tell me a little bit about where you grew up.

**Paula Pell:** I grew up in Joliet, Illinois, where the prison was—Stateville Penitentiary, but my birth was not related to the prison. And when I was 15, my dad, who worked for Illinois Bell, came home one day and—you know, in our childhood, we had a little camper. And we used to go down to Orlando all the time. Not all the time. But a couple times in my childhood, we drove down with the camper and did Disney World. And my dad said, “You know, there's this antitrust suit with the government for telephone companies, and they're offering, you know, this really great two-year job in Orlando. And I might apply for it just for the hell of it.”

And he did and he got it. So, we uprooted in the middle of my sophomore year in high school. I was going to a little Catholic all-girls school, and we moved to Orlando to a big public school. And I, of course, cried every morning and didn't want to go to leave my bathroom. My mom felt horrible, because I missed all my friends and my teachers. I was really involved in school. And I hated it at first, and then I ended up loving it. So, I grew up in Central Florida as a teenager, and it's really fun there as a teenager.

**Jesse Thorn:** I mean, that is a really sensitive time in your life. I mean, not that there is a non-sensitive time in your life, but like that's a sensitive time, whether or not you're moving to a new city.

**Paula Pell:** Well, you know, anytime I've been new—even now, when I'm new to any kind of job—I never wanted to be one of those people that's new that comes around like a politician like, “Hi, I'm new! I'm Paula. Let me tell you what I'm all about.” I like to sort of slowly draw people into me, if they choose to. And then I feel like it's real, and I can relax and feel like they really like me.

**Jesse Thorn:** Like a sea anemone?

**Paula Pell:** Yes, I lure them into my trap. And so, my mom has this amazing image that she shared with me years ago that I carry around all the time. And if I ever write a movie about a kid that's new in school, I'm going to put this in it—is that when I first got there, one of the things that I thought that I could maybe get into socially was I was a singer. So—and I was in a lot of show choirs and stuff. So, I got into the show choir at my school, which was a very good music department in the new high school. And I got into the show choir. I auditioned—

**Jesse Thorn:** What's a show choir?

**Paula Pell:** It's like just a little bit more of a smaller choir that does—like, they compete and stuff. You know, concert choir, sort of. And they call it different things in different schools, and it was a concert choir. And it was like super, hardcore choral music, like sacred music and different things that were in competition. And so, they were going to state. They had this

amazing choir. And I auditioned for it, and I got in. And so, like two weeks being brand-new in school, terrified, I went on like a weekend trip with everyone for this concert state contest. And my mom took me to the parking lot of my high school in the dark at like 5AM, and the bus was all lit. So, it was just this very cinematic thing of this lit bus with people sitting in it. And she just watched me get out with my little duffel bag. And I went in. And just watching me kind of go through trying to find a seat and not know anyone, and everyone's kind of like, you know, gaming seats, and nobody wants to invite me. And I got towards the end of the bus, and she said she sat for an hour in her car and cried. (*Chuckling.*) Because she was like, (*in anguish*) "I ruined my daughter's life!" But it all worked out.

[00:10:00]

**Jesse Thorn:** We're going to take a quick break. We'll be back in just a minute. When we return, even more with Paula Pell. It's *Bullseye* from [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and NPR.

(*ADVERTISEMENT*)

**Transition:** Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

**Jesse Thorn:** It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is Paula Pell. She wrote for *Saturday Night Live* for 18 years. You might have seen her on *30 Rock*, *AP Bio*, and *Girls5Eva*. She also starred in the movie *Wine Country*, which you can see on Netflix. I wonder if, when you went to high school in Orlando, you had a pumped-up version of the plan that many people concoct between middle school and high school. Like, you got to be—on what kind of person they're going to be for the new people that they are going to this new school with?

**Paula Pell:** Well, I went to a club night. My turning point was one night, about eight months in. I went to like a club night at the gym. (*Chuckling.*) Not a club as in terms of, you know, booze and coke and, you know, club night! No, it was—you sign up for—

**Jesse Thorn:** Grace Jones was there.

**Paula Pell:** (*Laughs.*) Grace Jones was there on a horse. No pants. The horse had pants, but not her.

**Jesse Thorn:** A majestic breastplate she was wearing.

(*Paula cackles.*)

Could it have been solid gold? Seems like too much gold. Must have been gold plated, but—

**Paula Pell:** Oh my god, that video I just saw of Grace Jones strutting around in her heels at 71. That's my spirit animal right there. No, I went to a club night, and they had all these clubs and different—you know, different groups you could either sign up for or you could kind of audition for and everything. And I got in this club called (*inaudible*), which was like the key club in the (*inaudible*). And I just got up and kind of did—I'm not a standup at all, but I kind

of got up and just talked about myself and did a bunch of schtick and probably made fun of my weight and all sorts of ( *censor beep*) that immediately gets people to immediately love you. It's the way in.

And they were just laughing. And then, you know, I got in, and it became sort of my little social circle. And then the choir became my social circle. And then I really enjoyed the rest of my time.

**Jesse Thorn:** Did you know at the time that you were romantically interested in women?

**Paula Pell:** ( *Chuckles.*) I actually—growing up, I used to draw women a lot, which always makes me laugh now. Because there were—back in my early years, there was a thing called—you know, Breck was a big hair product then. Breck was a brand. I don't know if it's even out there anymore. But if it is, please send me some conditioner. But on the back of magazines, they would have these weird like oil paintings or—it wasn't a photo, but it was like a picture sort of, a painting of these beautiful women with their beautiful hair. And it would just be their face and their hair. And I used to love like copying it. I loved copying their face and everything.

And then when I was in high school, I would have crushes on my friends. And then my best friend in high school and I were just inseparable. And then we ended up as a couple after high school for kind of most of college. And so, it kind of—it started early, but I didn't really officially come out to anybody really, including *SNL*. I was there for quite a few years without anyone knowing that. And the reason I came out is because James Anderson wrote a parody called Homocil, and I was helping him with it. And we went in to talk to them about it in a production meeting. And you know, everyone was really nervous that it was going to 'cause just a huge backlash from the gay community. ( *Chuckles.*) And it's the most pro-gay. It's like basically a pill that adults take if they think their kids are going to be gay. It's like take a pill, because it's not their problem, it's yours. And it's so pro-gay and supporting gay. And everyone just kept being so nervous about it.

And I finally just got sick of it. I was like, “Well, I'm gay, and I think it's the greatest thing, and people will be applauding it.” And that was how I sort of suddenly, after many years, just kind of told everyone in my world that I was gay. Because I wasn't really seeing anyone, and you can hide it easier when you're not seeing anybody. 'Cause you don't have to like change every pronoun of, you know, “Well, the person I went to dinner with, they were nice, and I had a good time with them. That person.”

[00:15:00]

**Jesse Thorn:** Let's hear a little bit of that sketch, because we pulled it.

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Clip:**

**Music:** Tender, lilting piano.

**Narrator:** (*Soothingly.*) Do you suffer from inexplicable anxiety? Are you confused and upset? Do you have an overwhelming feeling that you've done something wrong?

**Child 1:** Hi, Dad! This is called a double-Susie!

**Narrator:** You can't control whether he is or isn't, but you can control how it affects you. Homocil can provide relief from parental anxiety disorder.

(*Laughter.*)

Homocil can help.

**Child 2:** Hi, Mommy!

**Narrator:** If you obsess about things you can't change, if you are unable to cope with unforeseen developments—

**Child 1:** Look what I made! Isn't it fabulous?

(*Laughter.*)

**Narrator:** If you avoid prolonged contact with your children due to these overwhelming anxieties—

**Child 1:** Who wants crème brûlée?

**Narrator:** When taken regularly, Homocil dramatically decreases parental anxiety.

(*Game score buzzer.*)

**Chorus of Kids:** (*Singing.*)—so touch the floor. Go team! Go team! Woo!

**Narrator:** Homocil, until you come around. Because it's your problem, not theirs.

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Paula Pell:** It was always really fun in those years, because James and I—he was my best friend—he is my best friend—and roommate all through college. And we've known each other since we were teenagers. And he's still at *SNL* and has written basically everything you've ever laughed at there. And everything Kristen did. Like, Maya, so many people—Fred, Keenan. And he's so fantastic. And it was sort of always funny, because in those sort of what I consider middle years of *SNL* kind of veering into more—you know, as society became more gay people writing gay humor as opposed to just not, and it being obvious—it was kind of fun. Because sometimes people would just think that—they didn't get the subtleties of the gay stuff in it. And then you'd go to a gay bar, and it would be playing on a

loop up on all the screens at a gay bar. And you're just like, "Oh, thank god that there's this little sort of transitional thing happening where people are—"

You know, it would always bug me. I got hit one time on the internet. Oh my god, I was so furious. This woman, just in the early times of posting comments on sketches and stuff like that in the early internet. I think my Apple computer was like the size of a mini fridge. And this woman just—you know, I wrote a sketch with Ellen Page in it, and it was based on when I was young. I used to—I went for two years, after my first girlfriend and heartbreak and everything—I went for two years dating men. And I would go to a concert like the Indigo Girls at Melissa Etheridge or something, and I would come home so jacked up. I was just like, (*panting*) "It's just—there's just so many—just such a strong energy of women enjoying music."

You know, and I was so clearly just like wanting to be back in the home of my heart. And so, I wrote a sketch where she comes home to Andy Samberg from one of those concerts and is just like completely way too excited about this concert. And I got this—this woman just started coming at the whole thing, because she thought a little straight boy wrote it. And she was just like, "You know, I am so sick of like these terrible references and these dated references."

And I go, "Well, I have been here for years. I'm one of the senior writers here and a producer, and I have Indigo Girls cassettes in my car still. So, (*sensor beep*) it." Because I was like you're not going to make fun of a real gay person writing references that are real. You know, so come see me, and I'll show you my selection in my car.

**Jesse Thorn:** We pulled some of that sketch as well.

**Paula Pell:** We pulled all the stuff that was in your car, Paula.

**Jesse Thorn:** (*Laughs.*) Let's take a listen to Ellen Page from 2008 on *Saturday Night Live*, in a scene with Andy Samberg.

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Clip:**

**Boyfriend:** So, how was the actual concert?

**Girlfriend:** Oh, Melissa was insane! And her girlfriend came out and sang something with her, and they showed us slides of their kids, and it was so inspiring! And then the Indigo Girls came out as a surprise, and I was like, (*screaming*) "AHH! AHH!" (*Pants.*)

**Boyfriend:** Were there any guys there?

**Girlfriend:** No, no. And then they all sang “Closer I Am to Fine” together in this great big lezzie jam! And that is such a memory song for me!

[00:20:00]

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Paula Pell:** At one point, she puts her legs in the air and goes, “I just want to hug—why can't friends just hug each other with their legs?”

*(Jesse laughs.)*

Ohh, sometimes you just don't know. You don't know what you love and who you love. And you're just—but you're also just pure of heart. So, you're just saying it all, you know.

**Jesse Thorn:** That sketch was quite a few years before Ellen Page came out.

**Paula Pell:** It was, yeah. It was. And I think it was around when people were sort of torturing her a bit, trying to get her to come out, which is just such a *(censor beep)* thing, especially when someone's young like that, and they're in the public eye. It's just like, you know—hopefully a lot of that has changed to the point where a lot of people now, they have such a huge chain of people ahead of them that have come out. But back then it was just like—I mean, I wanted—when I dated guys, I really wanted to have a baby at the time. And I just didn't see any other way than finding some sort of relationship that was maybe, you know, bisexual or something that—but I knew that I was lesbian, and I wanted to just be with women. But I just kind of, I think, in my head, just kept thinking, “Well, there's somewhere I fit in-between.”

Which is, you know, certainly where many people are. And that's great. But I wasn't. But I was just kind of like—because there was just no one that would have a baby. You know, no woman that would be gay with another woman and have a baby. It's like how does that happen? And then people started adopting them and having them and... science.

*(Jesse laughs.)*

Science, and it's called making a phone call, having people come interview you and wait for a long time. But you can get one; you can do it.

**Jesse Thorn:** What happened when you and James Anderson wrote a gay-themed sketch, and you found that it was time for you to let everybody know that it was cool, because you were gay?

**Paula Pell:** Well, in a way it was—I don't think anyone—I was just always very sort of asexual there. I just never really dated anyone. And that show was sort of my *(chuckles)* significant other for those first few years. ‘Cause it was just so intense. And I was so there, constantly, even when I didn't have to be. And I was a very matronly sort of soul. So, I was

just always kind of mama to people. So, it just wasn't anything anyone was clocking that much. But I also had met someone who ended up being my wife, my ex. And you know, it's very hard when—'cause that show is very social. And when you're doing it, and you have someone coming to visit for the weekend, and they're coming to the show and—it just kind of all fell into place.

And I don't think any—I'm sure some people were just really surprised, that didn't say that to me. But you know, I didn't have any—certainly, no backlash or anything. It was just kind of a head cock, sort of curious like, “Wow! Really?” You know, it was that kind of thing.

**Jesse Thorn:** Had you really just kind of turned the volume down to two on that part of your life? Because *SNL* was so—

**Paula Pell:** Yeah, totally. Yeah. And I just—I wasn't ever a dater anyway. I mean, I really like—you know, James and I all through college, we just—(*chuckles*) we sort of kept each other safe from romance. We just like slept in the same bed for five years and just spooned and bought a bunch of—I mean, adopted a bunch of animals together and sort of created a very deep platonic life together. And so, I just never really dated that much. And had my first girlfriend, and then—you know, after that, I just sort of loved having my friends in my life.

And of course, the longer you go, the more that kind of floats out to sea, where you just can't even imagine it. You don't even know who the hell would even—who it would be or, you know. So, once I met my girlfriend who became my wife, it was pretty clear that was what I was going to be, how I was going to be living my life, and happily so. And so, I just—I got a lot less afraid to be open about it, because it was something real.

**Jesse Thorn:** We'll finish my conversation with Paula Pell after a quick break. She's just now kind of coming into her own as a performer. And I'll ask her what she thinks about that. It's *Bullseye* from [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and NPR.

#### **Promo:**

**Griffin McElroy:** (*Dramatically.*) From the twisted minds that brought you *The Adventure Zone: Balance*. And *Amnesty*, and *Graduation*, and *Ethersea*, and *Steeplechase*, and *Outerspace*, and all the other ones—

[00:25:00]

The McElroy brothers and dad are proud to reveal a bold vision for the future of actual play podcasting!

It's, um—it's called *The Adventure Zone vs. Dracula*.

**Music:** High energy, gothic-inspired harpsichord music.

**Justin McElroy:** Yeah, we're gonna kill Dracula's (*a censoring crow caw*).

**Travis McElroy:** We're gonna—well, we're gonna attempt—we haven't recorded all of it yet. We will attempt to kill Dracula's (*censoring crow caw*).

**Justin:** *The Adventure Zone vs. Dracula.*

**Griffin:** Yes, a season I will be running using the D&D 5th edition rule set. And there's two episodes out for you to listen to right now. We hope you will join us. Same bat-time, same bat-channel.

**Clint McElroy:** (*Amused.*) Bats, I see what you did there.

(*Music fades out.*)

**Transition:** Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

**Jesse Thorn:** Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is Paula Pell. She's a legendary writer for *Saturday Night Live*, *30 Rock*, and more. These days, she's been getting a lot more acting work. She stars alongside Busy Phillips, among others, in *Girls5eva*, a sitcom about a '90s girl group that has just reunited. When we talked in 2019, Pell was the star of the movie *Wine Country*—a comedy in which she performed alongside Amy Poehler, Maya Rudolph, and others. You can watch that on Netflix. Let's get back into our conversation.

You worked on *Saturday Night Live* for like nearly 20 years. And I wonder if during that time, there was a time when you wished you were a performer?

**Paula Pell:** You know, I was such a good kid. I was such a like Catholic kid. Just you know, in school just like, "Tell me what to do, and I shall do it."

And when I first got there, they said, "Take off your actor hat." And it was said kindly, but it was sort of saying don't have an agenda. Like, really thrive in what you're doing. Because there's already a cast. And it's a wise thing to tell people there, because if you came and just happened to be—I was not, but—an aggressive person that wanted to just—"I shall get there! I'm going to get on the show."

But I also just was so overwhelmed at even the offer to come there and write. I was in such a whirlwind for the first couple of years that I just wanted to do well with what I was doing. And so, you know, I think the times that I most wished that I was part of the cast is when we would do something musical. I used to write a lot of musical things. And if we were rehearsing music and just, you know, just really laughing and rehearsing, it was always a little sad to go sit back down behind the camera and just kind of watch them rehearse and realize, wow. You're one step disconnected from this that you always did your whole life since you were little. So, that part of it was a little hard.

But I always was such a character actor and such an old soul that I sort of knew that somewhere along the lines of my life that I would not have to put gray spray in my hair, and I would just be one of those—I always used to love Kathy Bates, because she started sort of a little bit late in her life. And then she was just this iconic theater person before she was a TV and movie person. And I used to just want to emulate her, because I was like, oh my god, just to feel like you know yourself, and you're a little bit older, and then you can play these character roles. And that was my way of sort of justifying my pain of not being an actor.  
(*Chuckles.*)

But I also just was having so much fun too. And there's something—the adrenaline is so high there, even if you're behind the scenes, that you feel that same thing that you'd feel as an actor. If you went straight into television writing or other kinds of television writing or movie writing, it's a harder transition. Because you don't do that high-adrenaline stuff as much. But at *SNL*, you always feel like you're pretty jacked up.

**Jesse Thorn:** Were you like going out for sitcoms? Did you audition for TV commercials when you were working on *Saturday Night Live*?

**Paula Pell:** Back in the day you mean?

**Jesse Thorn:** When you were working on *Saturday Night Live*.

**Paula Pell:** Nooo.

**Jesse Thorn:** You just were like, “This is everything. This is my whole life.”

**Paula Pell:** Oh, I put it away. Nope. I put it all away. And I never—even if they put us in a sketch, I was a little bit—I mean, I'd have fun, and I'd be—a lot of times I would ask the question in the monologue. And I used to enjoy it, but it would make me so nervous. Because I had so much going through my head. I'm like—first of all, it would usually be one line, and I would rather do a five-page scene where I have monologues than do one line. It's terrifying to do one line, because that's it, and you might go out there and screw it up and feel horrendous. But I really thought about it too much. I worried about it too much. If I ever did anything that got a laugh, I'd think, “Do they think—?” I was just always the good girl. I wanted to—if someone told me not to do something, I was always fearful of doing it. I'm a lot different. I'm 56. That goes away. (*Chuckles.*)

[00:30:00]

**Jesse Thorn:** I feel like the particular span of your comedy career is distinctive, because while there's still plenty of misogyny and homophobia in comedy, you know, we've gone from the world of Eddie Murphy's *Raw* in the mid-1980s to Wells for Boys on *Saturday Night Live*, my favorite thing of the last—my entire life. And it just must have been a trip for you as a gay woman to like—you know, you fought for a place in it early in your career and had to manage it for a long time to have come into your own as a performer at a time when that actually, for a lot of people, is like a cool, positive thing about—

**Paula Pell:** Oh yeah. It's just—I can't believe now—I mean, what's so fun about *Wine Country* being gay and my character being gay in *Wine Country*—since it's based on me and I'm gay (*laughs*)—it's so fun in the fact that I have this little storyline of flirting with this server at the restaurant. And then she—you know, we go to her art show and all this stuff. And I'm interested in just kind of having this fun hookup with her. It's so fun that it isn't called out. I feel like now it's just fun to be individual gay people and play individual gay people as opposed to like, “Oh, that's the gay character or the—” You know.

The next one I want to crack, and I think that they did it incredibly in *Shrill*, is doing characters that are individually fat characters. Because I've been fat my whole life, and I've always wanted to write to that. And I tried to write that in a sitcom years ago, and it just ends up being sort of the go-to. You know, people just want the go-to of the—we used to joke that, you know—I mean, joke, but it's a tragic thing that back in the '80s and '70s on sitcoms, the fat character would be the woman that, you know, somebody would go, “Hey, you want to go out with my cousin?”

And it's like, “Oh, sure! Is she nice?”

“Oh yeah, she's so nice.” You know.

“Yeah, meet me at eight o'clock tonight.”

And the cousin walks in, and she's fat. And it's like the audience would just laugh. It's just like the immediate punchline. And gay used to be the punchline. And you know, people of color used to be the punchline. Like, everything used to be the punchline. And *SNL* sort of reflected that over the years and I think always was years ahead in a lot of ways. But it still was that sort of community of comedy people that's their language they speak. And when I think back on it, you know, there were plenty of things back in the early years that I was there for that I just almost didn't even notice were so offensive at the time, because that was what the norm was. It was on—every show was that kind of tone.

But god, I'm so happy that things changed. And I'm glad that everyone has just sort of a built-in meter now, where they'll go, “Oh. No, that's not funny because of this.” They don't just say, “Don't do that, because you're going to get in trouble.” But no, they'll go, “No, that's not funny.” And that's what I love is that people are calling it out as not funny.

**Jesse Thorn:** Paula, I'm so grateful that you took all this time to be on *Bullseye*, and I'm grateful for your hilarious work.

*(Music fades in.)*

**Paula Pell:** Thank you. You're a very darling person, and I love your beard.

**Jesse Thorn:** Thank you.

**Paula Pell:** Do you like my beard?

**Jesse Thorn:** It's adorable.

**Transition:** Upbeat, jazzy synth.

**Jesse Thorn:** Paula Pell, a brilliant and hilarious writer. She's great in *Girls5Eva*, which is full of laughs. She is also great in everything. *AP Bio*, in the aforementioned *Wine Country*.

She was even great on *30 Rock*. She played Pete's intimidating and—well, terrifying wife. What a legend. Paula Pell.

**Transition:** Chiming 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. At my house, I've been trying to turn my shed into an office where I can watch stuff for this show. And well, yesterday I called the AV supply company, and it turns out they don't sell any mounts that are strong enough to hold my projector. So, I gotta build some weird brackets.

Anyway, our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producers, Jesus Ambrosio and Richard Robey. Our production fellow at Maximum Fun is Daniel Huecias. 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 The Go! Team. Our thanks to their label, Memphis Industries.

[00:35:00]

*Bullseye* is on Instagram, [@BullseyeWithJesseThorn](#). You can also find us on Twitter, on YouTube, and on Facebook. 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.

*(Music fades out.)*