

[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 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. My first guest this week is Michael Stipe. You know him as the lead singer of R.E.M., one of the biggest rock bands in the history of the genre. Maybe you also know him from his fun appearances on TV shows like *At Home with Amy Sedaris* and *The Adventures of Pete and Pete*. Outside of R.E.M., which broke up in 2011, he's collaborated with Warren Zevon, Patti Smith, Billy Bragg, KRS-One, and so many others. R.E.M. has also reunited. Well, sort of. Later this year, they'll be inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. They recently performed their classic “Losing My Religion” at the Songwriters Hall of Fame.

Music: “Losing My Religion” performed live by R.E.M..

That's me in the spot-light

Losing my religion

Trying to keep up with you

And I don't know if I can do it

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: I talked with Stipe in 2022. He'd been recording his own material sporadically back then. He still is. Here's one of those songs. It's called “Drive to the Ocean”.

Music: “Drive to the Ocean” from the album *Drive to the Ocean* by Michael Stipe.

I'll drive through the mountains

The crumbling west

I'll sing like the whales

Before man was a pest

Radio transistor

My friend by my side

I'll drive to the ocean

The ocean, I'll drive

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: Michael Stipe, welcome to *Bullseye*. I'm so happy to have you on the show.

Michael Stipe: Thank you, Jesse. I'm happy to be here.

Jesse Thorn: You were a military kid. Do you remember every stop of your childhood, or were there multiple stops before you remember?

Michael Stipe: There were multiple stops before I remember, but I know each place, because I've been back to most of them. But you know, that for me was normal. So, it felt perfectly normal for me when my father retired, and I started my band to kind of keep moving at that same pace.

Jesse Thorn: What's the first one that you remember?

Michael Stipe: The first place that I remember? It would have been in Georgia, I think. My first memory is my sister, my younger sister being born and them bringing her out into the parking lot of the hospital. And my older sister and I were sat in the back seat, waiting to see her for the first time. And my second memory is a hallucination. *(Chuckles.)* Because two months later—my sister was born September 30th, 1962, and I was two years old. And two months later I had contracted scarlet fever, pneumonia, and I had whooping cough, I think. But I almost died. And then I had a terrible reaction to the medication that they gave me for it. But my second memory is a photographer trying to get a picture of me in a Christmas sweater, and I was hallucinating. So, it was like a Jack Nicholson movie, you know, from the 1960s.

Jesse Thorn: How old are we talking about? Like, four or something?

Michael Stipe: Two, I was two.

Jesse Thorn: Holy mackerel!

(Michael agrees with a laugh.)

It's not unusual for me to have somebody on the show that grew up a military brat. And it's such an extreme social environment, because you are so bonded to whoever is traveling with you, whoever in your family is with you, your mom or whatever. Or in peace, you know, your mom and dad, or—you know, depending on the mix. You're also often, every two years or so, meeting new people and doing different stuff. And there are some people who come

out of that experience very socially facile, like just ready to go. Like, maybe they struggle with depth, but they can just show themselves to people and be like, “Yep, here I am! I've done this five times before. Let's go.” I don't, though, gather that that was what you were like when you were a kid. Am I wrong?

Michael Stipe: I mean, I would say that, you know, possibly one of the shared experiences of people who have that type of childhood or lifestyle growing up—you know, your family become very important, because they are your anchor much more than the community or the group of friends that you might make at school or out a church or in your neighborhood. And so, you know, I'm very lucky that I have a great family. I had a great father growing up, and I have this very loving, very intimate, and very close relationship with my sisters. And so—but I do think that a lot of that had to do with us picking up and moving all the time.

Music: “Nightswimming” from the album *Automatic for the People* by R.E.M.

Night swimming deserves a quiet night

[00:05:00]

The photograph on the dashboard, taken years ago

Turned around backwards to the windshield shows

Every streetlight, reveals the picture in reverse

Still, it's so much clearer

I forgot my shirt at the water's edge

The moon is low tonight

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: When did you figure out that you might be a, uh—a weird kid?

Michael Stipe: Weird, okay. *(Chuckles.)*

Jesse Thorn: Well, I picked that one out of a long list of possibilities, but “alternative” seemed a little on the nose. *(Laughs.)*

Michael Stipe: Okay. No, in terms—I mean, I figured out queer pretty early on, and then had to figure that out. Because the categories that were available to me didn't exactly match how I felt. And so, that was a bit odd, but I was the daydreamer. I was the kid that looked out the window. I'm the only boy of three kids. I'm the middle kid. I'm left-handed. I'm queer, as it turns out. So, there's all these—and a military kid. So, there's all these things that are maybe different from what other people—a more quote/unquote “normal” upbringing might provide.

But that's not so different, huh? I don't know that I ever—maybe—you know what? I bet I know what it was. I think probably—I could always emotionally read a room, even as a very, very young child. And so, there would be things going on that kids didn't need to know about, but I would look at the adults and see that something was wrong. So, I would pull someone aside and say, “What's happening?”

And they would routinely separate me from the other kids and say, “So and so has had an accident, and it's because of some bad men that he met during the war.” And we're talking about a distant family member, not my father, but who had a car wreck. And it's because he had been drinking, and this was in the early '60s. That's a good example. Though I mean, I think I was—I knew then that—you know, I'd go back, and all the kids would be playing, and no one else seemed to have tapped into this emotional dissonance that for me was absolutely like present in the room, like a fog. And the parents—you know, the parents or the adults would always—in my family, they would treat me with respect in terms of how they answered those questions. You know, it's a very different time than what a parent might say to a kid now. But they did their best, and they did a good job. Maybe that's when I realized that I was a little bit different from those around me.

Jesse Thorn: And that was a particular, real-life example that you just gave?

(Michael confirms.)

How old were you?

Michael Stipe: I would have been—that was probably five or six.

Jesse Thorn: That is really young to notice something like that.

Michael Stipe: Well. I mean, that's just who I am. *(Laughs.)* It's okay. I'm fine. I turned out okay.

(They chuckle.)

Jesse Thorn: What about the queer part of it? Because you've had romances with—you have a partner who's a man right now, I think, right?

Michael Stipe: Yeah, Dan.

Jesse Thorn: But you've had romances with women as well.

Michael Stipe: That's right.

Jesse Thorn: When did you realize something, and what did you realize?

Michael Stipe: Pretty early on. I mean, I think maybe as a young teenager, probably around 12. 13, 12 I would say. Yeah, no, earlier. I'm placing it now where I lived at the time. So,

that's always a nice way, because I know what years we move from so-and-so to so-and-so. So, it would have been earlier than that. Probably 11, 10.

Jesse Thorn: What did you notice?

Michael Stipe: I'm going backwards, aren't I? Maybe seven. I consider my—

Jesse Thorn: (*Chuckling.*) Okay, four is my final offer.

Michael Stipe: (*Laughs.*) I consider my first sexual experience that I remember, I was either six or seven years old. And that happened in Germany. It was with a brother/sister team. I still have a thing for redheads, as it turns out. And they were a good bit older than me, and I think they had a more of an idea of what they were doing. And it was completely fine. I don't think it had any bad impact on me, but I do remember it.

Jesse Thorn: I mean, what did you even know about what that meant at the time?

Michael Stipe: I didn't know anything. I mean, there wasn't much to...

Jesse Thorn: I mean, like the thing that I thought about when I thought about that was like—it's one very difficult trauma to go through “I'm supposed to be this, but actually I'm this” when you're gay. And you know, like “I know what I'm supposed to be, and it's definitely wrong”.

[00:10:00]

But it seems like a very different thing to be in a similar position and maybe, you know, not even know that people who are queer who aren't gay exist. You know, bi people or poly people or whatever, and you're just like—it's just a lot of extra stuff to sort out.

Michael Stipe: Well, I mean, I'm—and I don't know that wrong is the right term, because when you're in it, it doesn't feel wrong. You just realize that the people around you or the culture that you're moving through might not recognize how right it is, rather than it being wrong for you. But I'm just so thrilled that the 21st century has arrived at a place that I—you know, I feel like I've been beating that drum for a real long time that there is a sliding scale of desire and attraction. And we've arrived at a place where that's completely acceptable and wonderful and, in fact, has opened our minds up to a lot of concepts that I think in the 20th century were much more kind of beaten down into these very binary categories that didn't really serve—not only people that felt outside of that, but even the people that maybe didn't even ever have to think about it, because they did feel served by it.

Well, it's a quite limiting way to move through the world if everything is black and white, if everything is that like hot and cold or yes and no. So, yeah, I'm just thrilled that the 21st century has put us where we find ourselves now culturally. And there's a whole different level of understanding about these things.

Jesse Thorn: We've got so much more with Michael Stipe still to come. Stay with us. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

Transition: Chiming synth with a syncopated beat.

Jesse Thorn: Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. We're listening back to my 2022 conversation with Michael Stipe. He is, of course, the lead singer of the band R.E.M., one of the biggest alternative rock bands ever. R.E.M. was recently inducted into the Songwriters Hall of Fame. This fall, they will join the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Let's get back into our conversation.

Music: "Man on the Moon" from the album *Automatic for the People* by R.E.M.

If you believed they put a man on the moon

(Man on the moon)

If you believed there's nothing up his sleeve

Then nothing is cool

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: Did you make music when you were a kid?

Michael Stipe: My earliest memory of—I sang when we lived in Germany, so I would've been six or seven years old then. I was given a solo part in a Christmas pageant, I think. And my teacher, Mrs. Fujimoto, pulled my mom aside for a variety of reasons. One, because I was left-handed, and she wanted to find out if they needed to train me to write with my right hand. And my mom said absolutely not. Two was, "Should we medicate little Johnny Mike?" And my mother said absolutely not. And then I needed help with spelling, because I wasn't good with that.

But when I would sing, I would stand on the sides of my feet. I wouldn't stand flat footed, but I would kind of—so, Mrs. Fujimoto and my mom rehearsed with me my part, so that I would stand flat footed when it was my turn to sing. Well, the night came of the big pageant, the big Christmas pageant, and I stepped forward as I was supposed to do. And I started singing my part, but what they didn't—what we didn't do in rehearsal was there weren't lights. *(Chuckling.)* And so, a spotlight came on to me. I remember it, Jesse, as if it was yesterday. It was such a magnificent feeling to have that spotlight, but it surprised me. And so, of course, I stood on the side of my feet for the whole part, but I did hit the notes, and I finished my part and stepped back into the choir.

Jesse Thorn: Not only the context of that story but like the physical feeling of that story, I know exactly what you mean, the difference between standing on different parts of your feet. Like, I can understand why that aspect of the story is so vibrant to you even now.

Michael Stipe: It's such a kid thing, right? But also, just the power of the spotlight. My goodness. I mean, I certainly carried that into adulthood, huh?

Jesse Thorn: And you were into it?

Michael Stipe: Well, yeah! But I mean, it's thrilling, you know. (*Chuckles.*) There it is. That's—boom. There it is. I mean, I think I sing about it in—what song? “Losing My Religion”. Not a bad point of reference there.

Music: “Losing My Religion” from the album *Out of Time* by R.E.M.

That's me in the corner

That's me in the spot-light

Losing my religion

Trying to keep up with you

And I don't know if I can do it

Oh no, I've said too much

I haven't said enough

(Music fades out.)

Michael Stipe: Of course, that's not an autobiographic song at all. But you understand what I'm saying. But it's powerful to have that amount of attention on you.

[00:15:00]

And you're there to perform something, to do something, that's going to make people feel a certain way. There's immense power in that.

Jesse Thorn: How did you figure out that there was, you know, cool punk rock music in some places?

Michael Stipe: I was in detention when I was 14, I want to say. Someone had left a *CREEM* magazine under the desk that I was sat at, and I picked it up and started reading it. And there was an article about the CBGB scene, the nascent punk rock scene in New York City, with a picture of Patti Smith. And I looked at that photograph, and I was like, “That's—wow, like that's where I want to be.”

Jesse Thorn: Do you remember what about it?

Michael Stipe: She just looked really like compelling and otherworldly, alien. She looked alien. The article was written by Lisa Robinson, who I know, who's now a friend of mine. And Patti is, of course, now a friend. And I've met a lot of the people that were in bands then or had performed with the Ramones, with my former band, R.E.M., in Europe on tours in the 1980s and '90s. So, you know, I've had the privilege to be able to meet a lot of the people that were really my teenage heroes. And in some cases, develop quite close friendships. But that just turned me around. I mean, that was it. I was 15 when Patti's first album came out, and I bought it the day it came out, and I just never really looked back.

Jesse Thorn: What was the first like actual place you were or like person you were hanging out with or like physical thing in your actual life, rather than a thing you were reading about or receiving indirectly, where you were like, "Oh, well this works! This is the thing that I wanted. This is the thing I read about"?

Michael Stipe: I created a community around my—around my interest in punk rock. It set me apart, but no one else—I was going to high school then in Collinsville, Illinois, which is just outside of east St. Louis, which is just across the river from St. Louis. And so, no one there had any idea of any of this. I had created that community. I turned on some kids that were my age and a little bit older who were really, really cool kids. We were like Rumble Fish, and I was the guy with the—I was the nerd with the glasses, and they were like the guys who protected me 'cause they were really cool. One of them had an older brother who dealt drugs, and he was really, really cool. And they were just really cool. And so, they kind of protected me and I introduced them to this whole world that no one there knew about.

So, in a way, I kind of created that community myself. I mean, I remember going to parties with punk rock albums under my arm, and—you know, you—someone would throw the garage door open, and they'd have a turntable, and you would play records and people would bring their records and listen to them. And nobody wanted to hear what I had to bring.

(Jesse chuckles.)

I remember making—this is really embarrassing, but kind of amazing. I made a mimeographed—and 'cause Kinkos didn't exist at the time. Xerox existed I guess, but we called them mimeographs. I mimeographed posters that I made on 8x10 paper that said, "Tom Verlaine is God." Tom Verlaine being the lead guitarist and singer for the band Television, from the CBGB scene. No one at my high school knew who Tom Verlaine was, but it caused this huge ruckus, because it was blasphemous to call anyone God except for God. But then, all the English teachers were like, "It's Paul Verlaine." Like, they didn't know the—you know, they thought it was the romantic poet from France, not some guy from the middle of—you know, some guy from the Bowery. But anyway.

Jesse Thorn: *(Laughs.)* What did your what did your dad, the last in a long line of Methodist preachers, think about it?

Michael Stipe: My father wasn't a Methodist preacher. My grandfather was.

Jesse Thorn: Well, the end of the long line of Methodist preachers, I should say.

Michael Stipe: They never caught the vandal. You know, the vandal was me, of course. But they never caught the vandal. So, my father didn't hear about it. (*Chuckling.*) Nobody's heard about it until this interview, I don't think. That's pretty funny to admit, but there it is. What I wouldn't give to have one of those "Tom Verlaine as God" mimeograph sheets now.

Jesse Thorn: When did you feel like you were there? Was it when you got to art school?

Michael Stipe: What is there? What do you mean "there"?

Jesse Thorn: I mean like that you were inside the thing that you imagined being inside. I mean, you weren't literally inside of CBGB's scene at the time.

Michael Stipe: No, I wasn't.

Jesse Thorn: You're 1,000 miles away from that, but art school is a whole other deal.

Michael Stipe: I didn't feel like I was inside of it then, either. I have to say, Jesse, I was still—you know, I was very, very shy. And yeah, I didn't—I mean, the early punk rock scene in Athens, Georgia, which is where I moved when I was 18 to go to college, was really incredible. But I was kind of an outsider there.

[00:20:00]

I do remember there was a party, and it was—you know, the band Pylon, The Method Actors was a band here in the late '70s or late '80s. The B-52s, the kind of group of friends that were around the B-52s. There was a punk rock party that was happening at someone's house on some weekend night. And I was at the local lesbian bar, and I had taken a quaalude and I was badmouthing some guy. I don't even remember who he was, but I didn't like him for some reason. And I was really high, and I didn't realize I was badmouthing him to his best friend.

So, the guy clocked me and knocked me off a truck. And I got a bloody nose. And then I went to the punk rock party. So, I showed up and I was the youngest person there, and I had blood all down the front of my shirt. (*Laughs.*) And they just thought that was very punk rock. You know? And so, I think—I kind of—that was like my in into that crowd. Part of it was really sweet, because they just wanted to clean me up and like make sure I was okay. But part of it, I think they were a little bit like, "Wow, this is the real thing." Anyway. (*Laughs.*) I don't think anyone's ever heard that story, either. I have to thank Vanessa Briscoe from the band Pylon. She was the singer of that band, and she was particularly kind to me.

Jesse Thorn: Did you really want to be a performer? The way you described being in the spotlight, I was like, oh, okay, he was not the kind of shy where he didn't want to perform. He was the kind of shy where he knew he wanted that, but had to figure out how to do it.

Michael Stipe: Um. Yeah. I—(*sighs*) I really can't answer that. I mean, I don't—I don't know what I was thinking except that I just wanted to be in a band, and I wanted to do that. It didn't occur to me that, you know—and I've said this a million times, but it didn't occur to me that I would have to learn how to sing. I would have to learn how to—or play an

instrument. I sang because I couldn't play anything, so I was like, "I'll be the singer." And I wanted most of the attention. So, that's where you get most of the attention. But you know, if you listen to really, really early recordings—and please don't—you know, I sing like a rockabilly singer. It's all that I—you know, I knew Elvis Presley, so that's what I sang like.

And I thought it was kind of—I didn't have a vocal style. I have said before that my vocal style developed when like Peter and Bill—the other members of R.E.M.—were playing so fast that I couldn't keep up. And I thought it was too fast and they wouldn't slow down, 'cause they wanted to play really fast. So, I just started slowing down my part. And that developed into a vocal style, I think, where I held my vowels longer than you're supposed to. You know, we get that now from early Drake, but people weren't really singing like that back then.

Music: "Radio Free Europe" from the album *Murmur* by R.E.M.

Beside yourself if radio's gonna stay

Reason, it could polish up the gray

Put that, put that up your wall

That this isn't country at all

Ray beam station

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: There's also a kind of quality in the earlier R.E.M. things of both like an aesthetic choice that suggests a kind of timelessness and placelessness, and also that maybe—in your particular part of it, it feels like you are—you know, you're beyond that hiding a little bit.

Michael Stipe: Beyond? I missed something.

Jesse Thorn: Beyond just trying to be unplaceable, you know what I mean? Like, it's both of those things at the same time. You're kind of retiring. You're withdrawing a little bit.

Michael Stipe: Well, we—you know, as a—as a group, let's talk about that first, 'cause I think that's important. We had a distinct set of limitations, each of us. And those limitations allowed us to—one of the—one of the—the rule of no was one of the things that R.E.M. always—we always knew what we didn't want. And I, as a singer and as a performer, and even as a public figure, I know exactly what I don't want. I sometimes step into it, and then I've got egg on my face. But I know how I don't wanna come across. I know what I don't wanna write. I know what I don't want my voice to sound like. I know that I don't want it to

do that kind of throat scratchy... calisthenic kind of vocal thing too many times, 'cause that's just dumb and sounds insincere.

So, there was a lot of us being extremely limited and then taking those limitations and really pushing them as far as we could.

[00:25:00]

And within that, in a group dynamic, creating something that really was very, very new. And I don't know how timeless it wound up being. I listen to it now and it's hard for me to objectively listen to our past work, but I'm able to recognize stuff that I think is really, supremely great and then stuff that is—you know—for me, deeply embarrassing or not so great or "Mike could've used another—one more edit", you know. Or one more pass at a—at the third verse. You know. Anyway. I am my greatest critic in that regard, but I try not to look back that much. I understand that the work is out there. Once a song is released into the world, it belongs to everyone else and not to me.

And so, that's... you know, it's not my place to badmouth my past work at all.

Jesse Thorn: We'll wrap up with Michael Stipe after a quick break. When we return, he'll tell us about the song he's most proud of writing. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

Promo:

Music: Fun rock music.

Mike Cabellon: Hey, this is Mike Kalon.

Ify Nwadiwe: It's Ify Nwadiwe.

Sierra Katow: And Sierra Katow.

Mike: The hosts of *TV Chef Fantasy League*.

Sierra: Where we apply fantasy sports rules to cooking competition shows.

Ify: We're not professional chefs or fantasy sports bros.

Sierra: Just three comedians who love cooking shows and winning.

Mike: We'll cover *Top Chef*, *MasterChef*, *Great British Bake Off*, whatever's in season really.

Sierra: Ooh, you know chefs looove cooking whatever's in season.

Ify: We draft a team of chefs at the top of every series.

Sierra: And every week we recap the episode and assign points based on how our chefs did.

Mike: And at the end of the season, we crown a winner.

Sierra: You can even play along at home if you want.

Ify: Or you can just listen to us like a regular podcast about cooking shows. That's cool too.

Mike: Subscribe to *TV Chef Fantasy League* on MaximumFun.org or wherever you get your podcasts.

(Music ends.)

Transition: Thumpy rock music.

Jesse Thorn: I'm Jesse Thorn. You're listening to *Bullseye*. I'm talking with Michael Stipe of R.E.M..

What's something that you heard yourself do or heard on an R.E.M. record, you know, sometime in the last few years where you thought, "Gosh, I forgot about that. That is great. Like, that really worked"?

Michael Stipe: Well, I can tell you. I mean, that's an easy one for me. I think one of the best songs we ever wrote was on one of the later records. And they were just—you know, in America particularly, audiences were kind of over us. They were done with us. They were tired of me or my persona or had moved on to other things. But there's song called "Supernatural Superserious", which I think is one of the best things we ever wrote.

Music: "Supernatural Superserious" from the album *Accelerate* by R.E.M.

Everybody here

Comes from somewhere

But they would just as soon forget

And disguise

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

Michael Stipe: I sing it in my head all the time. I really like the—I really like the chorus. And there's a thing that I do at the end that is some of my best work. It's nice to be able to

say that. I mean, that's one thing about doing what I've done and what I did for so long, is that I can kind of look at the work and be proud of it and say, "I know that that's really, really quality. I know that that's really good." I won't talk about the things that are bad. I'll talk about them abstractly, but I'm not gonna say, "This song off of this record is just a deep, horrible embarrassment for me." Because someone might use that song in their wedding, or might—it might be their favorite. It might be the song that they fell in love to. It's not mine to say that, anymore. You know? But I can talk about the triumphs.

Music:

It's an experience, sweet, delirious

Supernatural, super serious

An experience, sweet, delirious

Supernatural, super serious

Wow

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: What was it like for you to have the life rhythm of being a performing musician when R.E.M. started—like, the first five years or so before you had hit records, but when you were working really, really hard? You know, there's things about it that are similar to the kind of peripatetic military kid lifestyle, but like there's also a real pattern of intensity and then slowdown that is kind of all-consuming.

Michael Stipe: I was born hyperactive, and that pace of those first early years, traveling around in a van, starving, having exactly one outfit to wear. You know, having to share everything with the other guys, not having any money, not having any means of support, not knowing what we were doing next, not knowing anything about where it was going or what it might become. It fed that hyperactivity and also the adrenaline that comes with performing. The adrenaline that comes from being in that spotlight, however small that spotlight might be, is something that I absolutely fed off of.

[00:30:00]

There are, of course, very negative aspects to that, and particularly if you do it again and again and over and over again, you've got to really take care of yourself. Or you're going to flame out.

Jesse Thorn: Did you have any sense of what you had to do to take care of yourself?

Michael Stipe: Really not until much later. I mean, I went through a very rough period in the mid-'80s, where I had about a year and a half long nervous breakdown. And that had to do

with a lot of things. But when I came through that, I felt a deeper sense of purpose, because I felt like I had come very close to death. And—or to just not ever coming back. You know? And uh, so yeah. So, some good songs came out of there for sure. But I had—there was a confidence and there was a—there was a purpose that was not there before. Before that, I think I was really just enjoying the ride and enjoying learning how to write and learning how to sing and finding my voice and learning how to be a public figure, as well, which was really not very easy, particularly then.

You know, this is a generation where—you know, selling out was something that was considered like the worst possible sin. And it's very different to the way today's generation might approach pop music or performing or being a public figure. And so, that came with its own set of difficulties.

Jesse Thorn: What kind of nervous breakdown was it? Was it depression or psychosis or exhaustion or—?

Michael Stipe: It was depression. It was exhaustion as well. But my adrenals were tapped out and I had no way to fix that. I didn't know how to fix it. I was worried for my own life. I was convinced that I was HIV positive. There was no way for me to test that at the time. And I wasn't sure that I wanted to be a pop star. I wasn't sure I wanted to be a public figure. I wasn't sure I wanted to be traveling like that or doing like—doing any of the things that we were doing. You know? It was just—it all compounded to create a really bad situation for me.

And the band didn't realize it at the time, and neither did I. I didn't know what depression felt like. I'd never been through it before. But this was very real. And I came through it eventually, but I—it was—I mean, the story of how I came out of it is quite intense. And you know, we don't need to talk about it here. It was a very intense, difficult thing that happened to me. And then, I came out of it. And then I—and then I had, as I said earlier, this deep sense of purpose that I don't think that I had before. You know? Before it was really just a lot of fun, and then it was pressure fun, and then it was pressure fun but with the specter of AIDs hanging over my head, and then pressure fun with the specter of AIDs and the exhaustion that comes from being in a continually adrenalized state. And at that point, I had stopped doing drugs years before and stopped drinking.

So, it was really—you know, it wasn't brought about by anything like that. But it was dark. It was very dark.

Jesse Thorn: What was the purpose that you found?

Michael Stipe: (*Beat.*) I think that's a good question. I mean, I think just to believe in myself and to be who I am and to—I don't know. I mean, suddenly I just felt elevated and free of the concerns and the fears that I had gone through. I flew very, very, very close to—I don't know how—I almost said something that's—I'm mixing metaphors, which I'm the king of. But it got as dark as it could possibly get. It could not have gotten darker. And then, this thing happened, and I was in literal darkness for 10 days. And then I came out of it, and I could see again. And I was not blind, and I was alive, and I was very grateful and very thankful for that.

Jesse Thorn: Were you working during that time?

Michael Stipe: Oh yeah, we didn't stop working. (*Chuckles.*) There's some good records that came out of it, truthfully. *Fables of the Reconstruction* was during that time period. And then, the tour that was *Reckoning*, from the second album came out of that.

Music: “Driver 8” from the album *Fables of the Reconstruction* by R.E.M.

The was is constructed stone by stone

The fields divided one by one

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

Jesse Thorn: Well, Michael Stipe, I'm so grateful to you for taking all this time to talk to me. We could talk for four more hours about different stuff, and I'm very grateful that you took this time.

Michael Stipe: Thank you, Jesse. Thanks for having me on.

Music:

We've been on this shift too long

And the train conductor says

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

Jesse Thorn: Michael Stipe. As we said, his band R.E.M. will be inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame this October.

Music:

... we have reached our destination

But we're still a ways away

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

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.

[00:35:00]

Although, I was glad I was in the office the other day, because the social media person for *Judge John Hodgman*—another show I work on—Nattie Lopez, stopped by. She was staying

with her dad in West Covina. And guess what? They didn't have anything to do, so they made chocolate chip cookies, and then they brought them to the office, and I ate a bunch of them.

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 Daniel Huecias. We get booking help from Mara Davis. Our interstitial music is by DJW, also known as Dan Wally. Our theme song is “Huddle Formation”, written and recorded by The Go! Team. Thanks to them and to their label, Memphis Industries. Go check out The Go! Team. Great freaking band.

Bullseye is on Instagram. Find pictures from behind the scenes and staff recommendations, all kinds of fun stuff. [@BullseyeWithJesseThorn](#). I think that's about it. Just remember, all great radio hosts have a signature sign off.

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

(Music ends in cheers and applause.)