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(ADVERTISEMENT)

Music: “Chop Suey!” from the album *Toxicity* by System of a Down.

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

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

Jesse Thorn: It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My first guest this week is Serj Tankian. He's best known as the lead singer of System of a Down. Yes, System of a Down, the band that recorded “Chop Suey!”, the smash hit from 2001.

Music:

Wake up (wake up)

Grab a brush and put on a little makeup

Hide scars to fade away the shakeup (hide the scars to fade away the—)

Why'd you leave the keys upon the table?

Here you go, creating another fable

You wanted to

Grab a brush and put on a little makeup

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

Jesse Thorn: And look, if you're around my age, you remember this song, and maybe you don't have the fondest feelings about This particular genre. And fair enough, there were a lot of corny and sometimes problematic bands back then. But among them, System of a Down were pretty special. “Chop Suey!” has a lot of the fun hallmarks of nu metal—you know, chug-a-chug guitars, groovy drums with the double kick, Serj screaming.

(Serj screams, then the music cuts out before fading back in.)

Then it goes quiet. The guitarist stops chugging, the drummer lays back. And listen to the melody.

Music:

I don't think you trust in

My self-righteous suicide

I cry when angels deserve to die

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

Jesse Thorn: Another band from that era might have gone discordant and edgy. The singer would start going on about how mad they are at their partner, or their mom, or whatever. But System of a Down transcends all that. Serj soars above it all. It's kind of beautiful.

Music:

... self-righteous suicide

I cry

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

Jesse Thorn: And then, back to the metal part. It's 2001, after all.

Music:

When angels deserve to die

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: Tankian is, of course, more than just the lead singer of System of a Down. He's also authored seven solo albums, including a classical symphony, and now he has a memoir. *Down with the System: A Memoir of Sorts* was published this past May. It's a great read. Let's kick things off with a classic tune from System of a Down's debut album. This is "Sugar".

Music: "Sugar" from the album *System of a Down* by System of a Down.

The Kombucha mushroom people, sitting around all day

Who can believe you? Who can believe you?

Let your mother pray

Sugar

Sugar

(Music fades out.)

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

Serj Tankian: Thank you, Jesse. It's a pleasure to be here.

Jesse Thorn: You grew up as an Armenian expatriate or refugee initially in Lebanon. What was it like to move to Southern California when you were a kid?

Serj Tankian: We weren't refugees technically. We were immigrants. My dad had applied for immigration in 1972. And then due to some difficulties, we weren't able to, you know, get the right paperwork done. And in '75, he was able to successfully do it right as the Lebanese Civil War started. So, we always say we're one of the lucky ones that got out quickly. I have a lot of friends who, you know, were there through a good part of the Lebanese Civil War. It lasted many years.

You know, I always describe coming to the US from Lebanon as going from black and white to color. You know, it was the 1970s, a lot of really colorful stuff happening. Whether it's the music or, you know, on the streets in Hollywood. And we landed smack in Hollywood. Like, we didn't go to Iowa and then move to the West coast. Like, we went from Beirut to Hollywood, you know? So, quite jarring.

Jesse Thorn: Like, literal Hollywood, like a bungalow in Hollywood, California.

Serj Tankian: Yeah. Yeah. Like, an apartment complex in Hollywood, California. My uncle and my grandparents were already here. So, was my mom's younger sister and her family. So, we had family here, luckily. And that was really helpful. My dad had to stay behind for about six months to get his paperwork done in Syria, because he was born in Syria, even though most of his life he was in Lebanon. And so, by the time he joined us, it was—you know, we were well into our school year, six months or more later.

Jesse Thorn: All four of your parents were survivors of the Armenian Genocide.

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Did you grow up hearing from them about that experience?

Serj Tankian: As we got older, my grandfather kind of started telling us the stories of his family, but very gently at first—or telling stories of survival and stuff like that. But when I was older—I was in my 20s or even 30s, I don't remember—we had the incredible opportunity of a nonprofit come and that—basically, they did witness testimonies of survivors of the Armenian Genocide, just like the Shoah Foundation with the Holocaust. And they interviewed him for days, like a few days.

So, I had my own video camera rolling. Which was amazing, because I was able to get all that, you know, life story from him. And we made transcripts out of them, which is how I was able to go back and really do a deep dive on his life and his story for the book.

Jesse Thorn: Was it hard to grow up in the shadow of that trauma? Not only in the sense that obviously it—you know, it marked your family's emotional lives forever, but also just that it is such a central defining event, particularly to the Armenian American experience. And I can only imagine that to some extent, when you're a 14-year-old, you're like, “Right, I'm trying to go to the mall right now.”

(They chuckle.)

You know what I mean? Like, not talk about things that happened 75 years ago.

Serj Tankian: Yeah. I think part of it for Armenians is, unlike the Holocaust—which had the Nuremberg trials thereafter and there was some type of justice meted out, even if it can't be perfect obviously—we never got that. We never got the tribulations and trials of those who were—you know, planned this mass atrocity.

Jesse Thorn: And also, the Armenian American community still very much fighting just for American and international recognition of the genocide.

Serj Tankian: Correct. And in 2019, Congress formally, finally recognized the genocide as well as President Joe Biden. But you know, it hasn't changed US policy ultimately toward Turkey, nor has it changed US policy toward military support for Azerbaijan, which has committed technically a second ethnic cleansing with Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. So, we have to ask ourselves that how important are these symbolic recognitions? The most important recognition would be from Turkey itself. And that's part of the trauma.

The real trauma is not just from the past, but it exists today. Because the descendants of the perpetrators of that genocide not only refuse to recognize it as genocide, but hypocritically threatened to do it again. I'm referring to Erdoğan, the president of Turkey.

Jesse Thorn: Sure. I'm going to ask you another version of that same question, which is when you were 14, were you ever just like, “Right, right, right. But I want to go to McDonald's. I want to go to McDonalds.”

Serj Tankian: I was at the mall. *(Laughs.)* I was at the mall, actually.

Jesse Thorn: Yeah, like, “Why am I the 14-year-old whose entire family life is bound up in this awful intergenerational trauma when I just want to be a chill Southern California dude and go to Orange Julius?”

Serj Tankian: Right. *(Laughs.)* Yeah, Orange Julius, I remember that. I actually worked in a mall in the valley, Fashion Square, when I was growing up at a shoe store. My dad's partner at the time had a retail shoe store there. And I loved working at the mall and seeing girls and all of that stuff in my late teens, you know. I had the normal Southern California experience,

don't get me wrong. And it's not like I had this at the back of my head every minute. But as you grow older and you realize, you know, some of the foundational kind of thoughts that mold your character and your people's character, it's there.

Jesse Thorn: Was there something that you listened to as a teenager that I would be thrilled to learn about? Like, were you super into The Carpenters or something?

Serj Tankian: I've listened to the Carpenters, but I don't know if I listened to them as a teenager. Probably. I mean, you know, you put on the radio at the time in the '70s and '80s and all of that, all of classic rock as well was there. So, yeah.

Jesse Thorn: Did you have any Seals & Crofts albums, or anything like that?

Serj Tankian: I didn't buy any Seals & Croft album. No, at the time. The albums I bought that I remember—and it was the '70s, late '70s—was through the Columbia House. Like, they had a thing where you could get like a bunch of records, and then you had to buy one a year at just ridiculous prices, probably. And I remember getting Rick James, *Saturday Night Fever*, Barbra Streisand and Barry Gibb.

Music: “Guilty” from the album *Guilty* by Barbra Streisand and Barry Gibb.

... just a matter of time

And we got nothing to be guilty of

Our love will climb and mountain, near or far

We are, and we never...

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: See, this is what we're looking for.

[00:10:00]

We're looking for Barbra Streisand and Barry Gibb.

Serj Tankian: And Barry Gibb, yeah. Guilty, baby.

Jesse Thorn: No offense to Rick James, too credible. Let's stick with Barry Gibb.

Serj Tankian: *(Laughs.)* Oh, I loved that record. *Guilty*, you remember that? Such great songs.

Jesse Thorn: Mm-hm. I mean, I was not even born yet, I don't think.

Serj Tankian: Oh yeah, true, true. You're younger. But the Gibbs— I mean, Barry Gibb wrote a bunch of great songs, you know, over the years. Amazing songwriter. And the story of their kind of, you know—Bee Gees, how they came about is very interesting from their doc and whatnot.

Jesse Thorn: Yeah, they have quite a history! One of those bands—there was a time in American popular music history where you could become monumentally successful as a band doing something completely different from what you started with 15 years later. Sort of like Tina Turner, Huey Lewis career path.

Serj Tankian: Yeah. No, I mean—but you know what you're saying is really important. Because I guess that is what I grew up with. And so, when I started doing music, that is what I wanted for myself. I wanted to be able to create a completely different record every time. And although with System we were very, you know, quite diverse between records, my yearning was always to do what I do now. Which is, you know, I make a rock record, then I work with an orchestra, make a classical record, and then I do a score, and it's more electronic. You know, each one of them is a completely different genre, and I get to dive into all of them. You know?

Music: “Act IV – Lamentation of the Beached” by Serj Tankian, a booming orchestral arrangement.

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: We've got so much more with System of a Down's Serj Tankian still to come. Stick around, it's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

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Music: “Hypnotize” from the album *Hypnotize* by System of a Down.

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

Jesse Thorn: Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is Serj Tankian. He is, of course, the lead singer and co-founder of the hard rock band System of a Down. He's also a solo artist, an activist, a symphonic composer, and now an author. *Down with the System: A Memoir of Sorts* is his latest book. It's out now. Let's get back into our conversation.

Music:

Why don't you ask the kids at Tiananmen Square?

Was fashion the reason why they were there?

They disguise it, hypnotize it

Television made you buy it

I'm just sitting in my car and waiting for my

She's scared that I will...

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: Your dad was very successful in business when you were in your middle childhood years and ended up splitting with his business partner and in active, intense litigation with his former business partner for the better part of a decade. And it sort of sapped all of your family's financial resources—

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—and from what I read in the book, much of your family's kind of emotional resources as well. Did you think that your life was destined to be connected to that forever? Like, helping your family, figuring out this gigantic problem, being a support to your family?

Serj Tankian: I don't know. I mean, I was—you know, I was trying to help him as much as I can. And I wish I had—I wish I was older, and I had more experience, as I do now, to be able to be of better service and more wise in terms of helping them with decision making. You know, I was young. I was in my teens, and I was trying to, you know, translate. Because their English wasn't great. I was trying to deal with the lawyers and helping them make the right decisions. And it was just very—it was really painful watching people that you love, you know, go through painful existence.

And it's not so much the financial loss, which was heavy on its own, but it was just the emotional daily grind of going through this negative kind of experience, right? And I saw them whittle away, you know, emotionally—spiritually, I guess—over the years. And it was very difficult. And I did what I could. And at the time, I had no idea what my future brought.

Jesse Thorn: There was a point where you thought, “Well, gosh, I've got so much experience doing this. Maybe I should just go to law school.”

Serj Tankian: Right. Yeah. So, I was working with my uncle in the—so, I had graduated Cal State Northridge. And I had a degree in marketing, and I decided to—my uncle had said, “Come work with me.” You know. “You need a job. Come work with me after college.” I had experience in his business, because I would intern with him over the summers for many years.

Jesse Thorn: He was a jeweler.

Serj Tankian: He was a jeweler in downtown LA. He had a jewelry manufacturing area. He had a wholesale business, a very thriving business. So, I went in with him. And we did trade shows and sold and, you know, like helped them run the company basically, as much as I could, straight out of college. And after a few years, I felt content with my productivity. But I knew that I was doing the wrong thing for me as a vision. Still wasn't confident that music was my vision. I just knew I was doing the wrong thing. (*Chuckles.*) So, I thought, you know, I know—you know, I know all these lawyers. I'm dealing with them. I know enough about law to easily kind of go into that world.

But it was a negative thing for me. And it had a negative connotation for me. And I didn't realize that at the time. So, I went to Long Beach to take these classes that teach you how to take the LSAT, which are the big tests you take to get into law school. And everyone there was really, really happy to be there. That was their vision. That was—you know, they were excited about the future possibilities. And I hated that. (*Laughs.*) You know? I was like—so, I left there feeling even more anxious. Because now this is not—now I realized this is not for me. I always say I had to go to the far ends of who I shouldn't be to admit to myself who I am.

And on the way back home, after a long day at work in downtown LA, after a long evening taking this class in Long Beach—a rainy, dramatic night. I had a Jeep Wrangler. I was driving on Laurel Canyon, slammed on my brakes, hit the steering wheel, and just screamed, “I want to do music. I want to do music.” You know. And it was an epiphany. It was an epiphany. It was my consciousness speaking out to me loudly.

Jesse Thorn: How old were you?

Serj Tankian: 24, 23.

Music: “36” from the album *Steal This Album!* by System of a Down.

Television is disgrace

Life you get old, it's the race

Can you break out, can you break out

Will you live at your own pace?

Now will you live at your own pace?

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: What's wild about this story—right?—is this is an experience that successful professional pop musicians have when they're 15. You know what I mean?

Serj Tankian: Right. Sometimes eight. You know? Like, yeah. I mean, people start—the guys in my band, in System of a Down, they all started around the age of eight. And they knew that's what they wanted to do. There was no ifs, ands, or buts. Like, you know, that was their vision. Everything else was just getting there. You know? But for me, it started in my 20s. But once it started, I dove in headfirst. I sat down with my uncle. I said, “I gotta—I can't do this anymore. I got to focus on my music.” And six months later, after losing whatever savings I had and—you know, at the time my family really needed the income as well, because they had lost everything. My dad was back to, you know, working for someone else after losing his business.

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And so, I came up with the idea of selling software. ‘Cause I had helped my uncle's company design a vertical industry software modular accounting system for them, for the jewelry industry. So, I started selling that and designing my own and doing retail POS systems.

Jesse Thorn: You already knew about trade shows. You already—(*chuckles*).

Serj Tankian: Yeah. Yeah. I had enough contacts in the industry. I knew that industry well.

Jesse Thorn: Did you wear a company polo shirt?

Serj Tankian: No, at that time I had long hair. I was tying it up. I had like this mean goatee, but I was wearing like a tie with like a denim shirt or something like that. Half rock, half not, right? Still doing the day job, but it was at least my job. Like, I owned the company. You know. But then it started doing well, which is not something you plan on. You just want to get by, so you have time to do your art. But then when it does really well, it's taking up all your time. You're back to square one.

So, I had to sell the company for a very small amount, just enough to get me by to the next check from System of a Down.

Music: “Mind” from the album *System of a Down* by System of a Down.

Need the ones you love and love the ones you bleed

Lives rearranged and lives in my range, can you see?

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: When you're singing in a metal band, it's a particular thing. So, were you always able to—let's start with the... I would say your two categories of singing that are specific to metal would be your soaring and your growling. So, let's start with soaring.

(They laugh.)

Were you always able to scream-sing, like really wail?

Serj Tankian: I think scream-singing is happens when you can't properly hit the note. So, your voice cracks, you're scream-singing then. Growling is the same thing on the bottom, basically. So, yeah. I mean, you know, it's funny, 'cause it's been about 30 years with System of a Down alone. So, people are like, "Oh my God, his voice doesn't sound that way. He can't scream the same way." I'm like, duh! You know, like (*chuckles*) it's impossible. You know?

Jesse Thorn: I mean, that's a huge challenge for a lot of professional singers, especially ones who are untrained. But certainly for a lot of metal singers who are doing things that are really dangerous for their health as a singer. You know what I mean? I'm not talking about like they're doing drugs or something. I'm talking about like the act of singing, if you're in that extreme way, if you're not really careful about it, can really damage your instrument.

Serj Tankian: Absolutely. It's the perfect kind of balance of your vocal cords being in tuned in a certain direction, your mouth cavity, your chest, you know, your breath, your lungs, your ribs. I mean, I've hurt myself on stage once reeeally badly that started giving me back problems over the years. 'Cause I had jumped up in the air screaming. And when I landed, I landed in a way that my lung collapsed in a way and pushed on a rib. And I couldn't straighten my body. I was in extreme pain, literally. Luckily it was the end of the set, and they just literally folded me into a car and sent me to a chiropractor. And that was the middle of the tour. So, I had to get through that tour with tiger balm and, you know, trying to just stand straight and sing. It was really painful. And that was like 25 years ago.

It is a unique thing. And you know—I mean, there are techniques. Over the years I've learned to scream or screech or growl and, you know, trick techniques to kind of make it easier on your voice. It's still not great for your voice, but way less damaging.

Jesse Thorn: What's an example?

Serj Tankian: Backwards breathing.

Jesse Thorn: What does that mean?

(Serj lets out a rumbling growl that finishes with a squeak.)

(They laugh.)

Ladies and gentlemen, do not adjust your radios!

Serj Tankian: That's right. It's not coming from Mars. Yeah, so that's an easy one. See, my voice is still kind of intact. And you know, it's just backward breathing with like opening up your mouth cavity in a certain way where it just dries it, but doesn't do anything else.

Jesse Thorn: Is that something that you figure out accidentally, or are you just like having lunch with whatever—Bruce Dickinson one day?

Serj Tankian: No, I figured it out accidentally. No, I wish. No one told me that one.

Jesse Thorn: He's like, "Okay, we got some metal stuff we need to tell you."

Serj Tankian: Yeah, yeah. No, that would have been nice. "Point one: screech." No, I learned it on my own. But I've since seen YouTube videos teaching how to scream and growl and all this stuff more recently.

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Which is very, very interesting. But yeah, I just came upon things always by accident, from my career to everything that I've done.

Music: "Toxicity" from the album *Toxicity* by System of a Down.

Eating seeds is a pastime activity

The toxicity of our city, of our city

You! What, do you own the world?

How do you own disorder? Disorder

Now somewhere between the sacred silence

Sacred silence and sleep...

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: There's a really funny story. I mean, it is also a poignant story. But there's a funny story that I learned in your book, which is there was a point in System of a Down where you weren't sure if you wanted to be doing it. And you know, these were your friends of 20 years at that point. And you know, I think you were probably aware that the active income of being in System of a Down was important to them in addition to the passive. And at some point you had a meeting where you said, "These are the things I would need to be in System of a Down, but maybe you should get somebody else to sing if that doesn't work."

And there's a point in—there's a story in the book— And they're like, "Well, we don't know." And there's a story in the book where you're hanging out with one of the other band members watching this singer singing—this Armenian guy singing Armenian music. And he says to you, "Oh, you know, we actually auditioned him to be in the band, but he couldn't growl."

(They laugh.)

Serj Tankian: And do you remember my response?

Jesse Thorn: I do, but you tell it.

Serj Tankian: My response was, “Oh, okay. I’ll take him into the parking lot and teach him in like five minutes.” You know, I was—so, the story you’re referring to was in 2017 after we played a long tour in Europe, 20-something dates. We came back, and I was confident at the time that touring was not for me anymore. I had severe back problems. ‘Cause I hurt my back on tour, in the middle of the tour in Belgium, I remember. And I was still reeling from it. And over time, over the number of years—because we were, you know—we took a hiatus between 2006 and 2011. And then we kind of toured between 2011 and 2017.

And at that point I was like, “You know, I just really don’t want to go on a tour.” You know. I just got over the travel, you know, the physicality of it. Right? I love performing. I just didn’t want to travel, you know. And it also gets redundant artistically after a while, while you’re on tour—if it’s more than one or two shows. So, I sat—you know, we had a band meeting discussing multiple things. And I asked for—you know, to add me as one item on the band meeting. And when it got to my turn, I just said, “Who’s throwing me the going away party? Who’s going to MC it?”

And they’re like, “What?!” (*Chuckles.*)

I’m like—you know, I’m like, “Guys, you guys know that I don’t want to tour. You know? And we haven’t been able to make a record. So, I kind of—if you guys need to find a new singer, I’m totally open to that. Because I love and respect you guys, and I don’t want to hold you back. You know, the band is something very important—not just to you guys, but to me. And let’s figure something out. And if I can help—let’s be one of those unique situations that instead of cussing each other out and going our separate ways, or me going my separate way, let me be constructive. You know, let me help you find someone, if necessary. You know?” I actually did find someone.

Jesse Thorn: But Serj, that is a two—that is a double-edged sword or a two-sided coin or a whatever, right? Like, on the one hand, you are being accommodating and helpful. On the other hand, you are—

Serj Tankian: I don’t believe it would be great, on the other hand.

Jesse Thorn: Yeah, and also you’re telling them, “Eh, not worth it to me. Later guys.”

Serj Tankian: Yeah. Well, you know, I just wanted—I didn’t—you know. I wanted to give them an option, right? Now, if you ask me, if I was staying in the band at the time—in 2017—and someone else was going to leave, I would never continue without them.

Jesse Thorn: And you had actually, previous to having that meeting—years before having that meeting—also introduced the possibility of an agreement that nobody would tour on the name without all four of you.

Serj Tankian: Correct. And they didn’t want to do that. So, I kind of gave up on my hope of that just being, you know, basically tying all of us four into stone like Excalibur, (*laughs*) and

no one being able to pull it out. You know, because it was important to me. It's still important to me. I think System of a Down should always be us four. But irrespective of what I felt—because I was the one, you know, getting in their way, if you will.

[00:30:00]

I wanted to give them an option. So, that's why I did that at the time. And at the time they're just like, “No, man, it's cool. If something comes up, an opportunity, we'll send it your way. We won't put pressure.” ‘Cause before that, if something came up, they were like, “Come on, we got to do this tour! Come on.” Like, there was a lot of pressure—right?—to do tours, to perform and stuff. And I just didn't want that pressure anymore. So, they promised they wouldn't do that. And so, that kind of changed things a little. (*Chuckles.*) You know, at least at that time.

It's a unique dynamic, bands, Jesse. Like, it's a really—you know, they're your creative partners; they're your business partners; no one can have the same exact vision; no one can have the same exact thought process. And trying to negotiate all that where everyone is happy is really, really not easy.

Jesse Thorn: And you're in the place where the thing that tied you to Daron, who had previously been writing most of the songs in the band and was the guitarist and often co-vocalist with you, was that he was the guy that you met who had vision that you hadn't seen in other people that you played music with. Like, he was the guy who was excited to be putting the pedal to the metal and driving the boat.

Serj Tankian: We had the same vision starting. Yes.

Jesse Thorn: That was a tortured metaphor, by the way.

(*Serj laughs.*)

I don't think boats have pedals, but right. Like, this was—not just that you had the same vision, but like he had a ferocity of vision that was required for you guys to make a career doing this, right?

Serj Tankian: Absolutely. Daron and I were definitely on the same page when we started. And at first he wrote all the music, and I wrote all the lyrics for our first record. Second record, I started bringing in some more music. He started bringing in more lyrics. I would say that *Steal This Album!*—which is our third record—it was almost 50/50. Like, I was bringing in half the songs with lyrics, and he was bringing the other half of the songs with lyrics. And then I would add to his lyrics, and he would add to my music or whatever—rearrange some of the music.

So, it was very balanced, which is kind of why I really love that album, even though it's not the biggest hit record album. And we've never toured for it. Most of those songs were never played live, but there's something special about *Steal This Album!* for me.

Jesse Thorn: My producer, Jesus, is smiling and nodding. (*Chuckles.*) Thanks Jesus.

Serj Tankian: (*Whispering.*) That's my favorite one. That's my favorite one.

By the time we got around to *Mesmerize/Hypnotize*, it had kind of—you know, I think my—before we—while we were working on *Mesmerize/Hypnotize*, I told the guys—I gave them like a two-years heads up and said, “Listen, when we're done with this next record phase, I need to do my own thing.”

Music: “Deserving?” from the album *Imperfect Harmonies* by Serj Tankian.

I don't deserve you, why can't you see?

I will desert you, why don't you leave?

But you put your faith in me one last time

You, you put your faith...

(Music fades out)

Jesse Thorn: We'll wrap up with Serj Tankian after a break. System of a Down, Serj's band, plays aggressive music—at least most of the time. Songs that are about really intense emotions. In fact, songs that are often about aggression. So, if you're Serj, what's it like when someone who knows and loves you as that kind of intense emotional vent actually talks to you as a real human being?

We'll find out from the man himself. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

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Promo:

Music: Exciting, upbeat music.

Ify Nwadiwe: Since 2017, *Maximum Film* has had the same slogan.

Alonso Duralde: The podcast that's not just a bunch of straight white guys.

Drea Clark: Ooh, we've learned something over the years. Some people out there really do not like that slogan!

Ify: Listen, we love straight White guys.

Drea: Well, some of them.

Alonso: But if there's one thing we can't change, it's who we are.

Ify: I'm Ify, a comedian who was on strike last year in two different unions.

[00:35:00]

Drea: I'm Drea. I've been a producer and film festival programmer for decades.

Alonso: And I'm Alonso, a film critic who literally wrote the book on queer Hollywood.

Ify: You can listen to us talk movies and the movie biz every week on *Maximum Film*.

Alonso: We may not be straight White guys, but we love movies, and we know what we're talking about.

Drea: Listen to *Maximum Film* on Maximum Fun or wherever you listen to podcasts.

(Music ends.)

Transition: Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

Jesse Thorn: I'm Jesse Thorn. You're listening to *Bullseye*. I'm talking with Serj Tankian. He's the lead singer of System of a Down. He has a new memoir. It's called *Down with the System*.

When you make music as intense as the music of System of a Down—and look, you know, your orchestral compositions are also intense. There's certainly some of the most growl-oriented orchestral compositions out there.

(They chuckle.)

But like, when you make music as intense as System of a Down's, you have a certain kind of responsibility to the biggest, most powerful adolescent feelings of humanity. You know? Like, to people who are dealing with the things that are at their hugest when you're 17. You know what I mean?

Serj Tankian: Absolutely.

Jesse Thorn: As I was thinking about that, listening to your records. Like, I was thinking of two things. One is how different it must be and how much work it must be to generate that, to connect with that as a 50-year-old than it is as a 23-year-old. And also, that it must be an immense challenge to, you know, represent that piece of people to them, like a piece of their identity to them. Like, the way that, you know, even that 45-year-old or my father-in-law,

Steve, who's 65—that when they put on your CD or they hit play on the streaming service, it like represents that piece of them. It's a really intense piece of them, right?

Serj Tankian: Absolutely, yeah.

Jesse Thorn: So, first question is: how is it different now?

Serj Tankian: First of all, I want to say hi to your father-in-law, Steve. *(Laughs.)*

Jesse Thorn: Steve really appreciates it. Steve's one of the best guys ever, so.

Serj Tankian: It's different. It's very different, you know. One of—I have a new EP coming out called *Foundations*. And because I put out the book, I wanted to find songs from way back up until now—songs I hadn't released that I thought would be great songs to release, almost like a companion with the book. And the first song we released is called “A.F. Day”.

Music: “A.F. Day” by Serj Tankian.

Why do religions require from their faithful blind and unquestioning servitude?

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

Serj Tankian: It's from at least 20/25 years ago. And when I listened to it, the vocals are like really raw. I couldn't replicate that now, nor the emotion behind it. So, I decided, irrespective of the fact that the vocals don't sound great to me—like, they sound reverb-y and not clean; I can make that song sound a lot better. But I decided consciously to leave it. Leave it as is.

Music:

Well, I borrowed rent today, so I can let my body stay awhile

(Music fades out.)

Serj Tankian: I cleaned up the drums. I cleaned up the guitars. But pretty much the original track, the original demos. And I released it. And it does speak to the 17-year-old. But if I sang it now, it wouldn't. Right? So—but I'm not trying to speak for anyone. Art is a very selfish endeavor. Right? You make whatever comes to you from collective consciousness, and you do the best you can to present it the way that you can. And whatever happens thereafter, you have zero control, and you should have zero anticipation for.

Jesse Thorn: How do you feel about people coming up to you and having connected with their deepest and most intense feelings? Including—like, I have a lot of musicians on this show and have had for many, many years. All of them have connected with listeners and their deepest emotions, right? Not all of them have connected with listeners and their deepest aggressions. Which, if you're making metal, is a central part of what's going on. Right? So, what's it like when somebody comes up to you?

Serj Tankian: It's incredible. I mean, I hear a lot of stories, whether it's online or in person, at signings or whatever. Someone will come up and—

[00:40:00]

I mean, I've heard stuff where someone will come up and go, “You saved my life,” and they go, “Literally.” You know? And I get so happy, and I give them a hug.

And I go, “Thank you, because music saved my life, too.” Like, I get it. You know, it's very special how it affects people. Because you do the music that you do, and you put it out there. And you have, again, like I said, no understanding of the repercussions.

But the aggression that you're referring to is very interesting. I've met a lot of musicians doing this, and I can say very easily that people that play heavy music exorcise their negativity and demons through their music and are usually pretty light-hearted people and down to earth people. People who play happy music don't get that same privilege, and they're usually—(*chuckles*) again, I'm generalizing—not the nicest people, you know? So, it's kind of—it's a very interesting thing that I think when you scream to the gods, you kind of let go of all your anger, your emotions.

I was actually having dinner with a friend of mine from Seattle. He used to live in LA for a while. And him and I would—you know, early on in the band's days, we'd go ball. Like, we'd go play basketball somewhere together all the time. And early in the band's days, we were touring. And whatever I was going through, I was kind of complaining to him going, “Man, this, that, and the other!” And he just looked at me. And he smiled. And I'm like, “Why are you smiling?”

He goes, “Because you get to scream every night. All your anger, all your frustrations. And they're loving you for it. And they're paying you for it. Shut the (*sensor beep*) up.” Right?

(*Jesse laughs.*)

Like, so—and it's true. It's true. It's a privilege.

Jesse Thorn: Well, Serj, I sure appreciate your time. It was really nice to get to talk to you.

Serj Tankian: Thank you. I like that you ended it on that.

(*They laugh.*)

Jesse Thorn: Well, I mean, will you give us a scream on the way out? Because we heard a growl.

Serj Tankian: Oh. (*Beat.*) Yeah, screams I can't do as well without kind of building up to it. Why am I gonna scream, bro? Why are you making me scream?

Jesse Thorn: I'm making you. Because I'm making you, that's why.

Serj Tankian: (*Laughing.*) Don't make me—(*releases a little wail*).

Jesse Thorn: Sweet. Awesome.

Music: “Roulette” from the album *Steal This Album!* by System of a Down.

(*Music continues under the dialogue.*)

Jesse Thorn: Serj Tankian. His new memoir is called *Down with the System*. It's out now. If you live here in Los Angeles, Serj just opened up his very own coffee shop in Eagle Rock. It's called Kavat Coffee. It's not too far from the Trader Joe's on Colorado. Armenian Coffee, its own special thing. Serj is fanatical about it. Worth a visit. Let's go out on one more System of a Down song. This one is a special request from our producer, Jesus Ambrosio, “Roulette”.

Music:

I don't know, how I feel when I'm around you

Around you

Left a message but it ain't a bit of use

I have some pictures, the wild might be the deuce

Today you saw, you saw me, you explained

Playing the show when running down the plane

I know, how I feel when I'm around you

I don't know, how I feel when I'm around you

(*Music continues under the dialogue.*)

Jesse Thorn: That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye*, created from the homes of me and the staff of Maximum Fun, in and around Greater Los Angeles, California. Here in Los Angeles, my dog Junior—I got a nice new leather collar. A beautiful, buttery leather collar, and I—you know, I figured this dog's gonna have this forever. And then he

immediately jumped (*chuckles*) headfirst into a wading pool, soaked it completely, and it got all weird. Now I gotta buy another one. Anyway, he's a good dog.

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, Daniel Huecias. We get booking help from Mara Davis. By the way, Mara lives in Atlanta, Georgia—which is the home of Georgia Public Broadcasting, GPB. We are making our debut on GPB this week. We are so excited to be joining their lineup. Welcome, everybody out there in the Peach State!

Our interstitial music is by DJW, also known as Dan Wally. Dan and me and our buddy, Ben, went to see Brent Weinbach's album recording. Standup comedian Brent Weinbach. Truly one of the funniest dudes in the world. It was a great night out. Our theme song is called “Huddle Formation”, written and recorded by The Go! Team. Our thanks to them and to their label, Memphis Industries.

You can find *Bullseye* on Instagram, [@BullseyeWithJesseThorn](#). I am on Instagram, [@JesseThornVeryFamous](#).

[00:45:00]

You can also find us on Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook. And I think that's about it. Just remember: all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

Music:

Around you...

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

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

Music:

Around you

(Song ends.)

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