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**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. My first guest this week is John Cena—the same John Cena who once dominated the squared circle in the WWE.

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Clip:**

**John Cena:** Listen up, wildcard.

*(Cheers and screams from the audience.)*

*(Low and intimidating.)* You think you can just waltz into the Monday Night Raw, play cowboy, and then realize you made a mistake? You go AWOL on me out there, and I promise I will pummel your face into mush.

*(Playfully.)* No, no I'm totally kidding, man! You picked the right team. Honestly, you'll be all set.

**Speaker:** *(Laughing in relief.)* Wow, you genuinely—that was...

**John Cena:** Look at you. You're what, 5'7"?

**Speaker:** Uh, 5'4".

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Jesse Thorn:** The same John Cena who, after being very good at wrestling, proved to be very good at comedy acting, too!

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Clip:**

**Steven (*Trainwreck*):** Mark Wahlberg? Me?!

**Speaker:** (*Mouth full.*) Who else looks like Mark Wahlberg? Your girl?

**John Cena:** (*Insulted.*) Mark Wahlberg's like 150 pounds. I'm 250 lean. I look like Mark Wahlberg ate Mark Wahlberg.

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Jesse Thorn:** The same John Cena who got naked onstage at the Oscars this year.

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Clip:**

(*Titters from the audience.*)

**John Cena:** Costumes.

(*Laughter and applause.*)

They are so important. Maybe the most important thing there is. (*Stammering*) I—I can't open the envelope.

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Jesse Thorn:** That John Cena. The very talented, very thoughtful super hunk who probably follows you on Twitter. He recently announced his imminent retirement from wrestling. We'll get into that, I promise. And he also has a new movie out, an action comedy called *Jackpot!*. Let's hear a little bit from that now.

*Jackpot!* also stars Awkwafina as Katie. Katie is a struggling actress who just got a very lucky break. She won the California lottery, but there is a catch. It is 2030. Specifically, it is a very dystopian 2030. And not a moment after she wins, she is violently attacked by strangers. Enter Noel, played by my guest John Cena, who offers to protect her and fill her in on what's happening.

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Clip:**

**Music:** Upbeat synth hip-hop.

**Noel (*Jackpot!*):** Katie, you won the lottery! And now anyone with a losing ticket that kills you before sundown gets your money. Legally.

**Katie:** Okay, that's murder.

**Noel:** (*Pleasantly.*) Oh, not in California. It's just a chance at the big time.

**Katie:** Okay, when the (*cancel beep*) did this become a thing?!

**Noel:** I don't know, a few years ago? How did you not hear about this?

**Katie:** Me and my mom just watch movies and emotionally neutral baking shows. We don't watch the news. It's too depressing.

**Noel:** Yeah, but you gotta keep up with what's going on in the world.

(*Katie groans frustratedly.*)

It's our duty as a citizen of Earth. Hey, look. Shutterbug's gonna a poster location every 14 minutes. But your fans around here, they're just gonna see you tailing us.

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

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

**John Cena:** Thanks so much for having me. I appreciate it.

**Jesse Thorn:** You look beautiful. You must have to have your clothes made. (*Chuckles.*) It occurs to me as I look at you through the zoom window.

**John Cena:** Hopefully the looks will translate to radio.

**Jesse Thorn:** (*Chuckles.*) This movie is even more action-oriented than I anticipated. I mean, Paul Feig has made some pretty actiony action comedies, but this is pretty wall-to-wall. What is the most like physically challenging part of doing that?

**John Cena:** Honestly, something like this where the action is over the top yet kind of reality-based, this kind of plays in my skill set. So, I was actually able to participate in a lot where, normally, if you're doing like a *Fast & the Furious* or some of the stuff for DC or the real over the top, you know, stretching the suspension of disbelief, taking it to the max—that's usually when I have to rely mostly on stunt performers, because this stuff is just so dangerous.

**Jesse Thorn:** What have you learned about sort of performing violence as an actor that you didn't know as a wrestler?

**John Cena:** That's a great question. They're just two different disciplines. The strategies you learn in live performance are different than the strategies you would incorporate with camera cutaways. In the movies, everything should be a miss. Because you can stack it, and safety first. Like, the goal truly is not to hit the other person you're fighting. If a director should choose, or if a coordinator should choose to shoot the impacts, then you're kind of toeing that

line. But in live performance, there isn't—you can't stack punches. You have to bring them all.

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So, there's a lot more of physical contact. But I like the magic. (*Laughs.*) I don't like getting hit in the face. So, I like the magic aspect of cinema. And it really makes for some wonderful choreography, especially when you can film it in beats and then weave it all together and see it as a masterpiece. Where—you know—in live performance, you have what you have.

**Jesse Thorn:** When I was in school, I took some stage combat classes and also some like physical theatre classes. And Awkwafina's character in the movie opens by—like, she's carrying a gym bag that says “combat” on it, and then—

**John Cena:** The stage fighting class, yeah.

**Jesse Thorn:** Yeah. The thing that it struck me that both of them share—right?—is that the sell is always in the reaction, right? Like, the person who is the subject of a punch or a strike or whatever is always the boss of what's going on. And the reaction in comedy is always much more important than the action. And it's the same way in stage combat, that like the way you fall, the way you react to the act of violence is always like what makes it.

To what extent is that true in wrestling or in making movies?

**John Cena:** Well, I—uh, I think I would agree with that in both disciplines. If you do the coolest maneuver, and someone just stands there, it doesn't really have impact. But you could do something small, and something small yet effective, and have it mean something. I think a lot of times the biggest hill I have to climb a lot of times in working with WWE talent or sometimes stunt choreography is the wanting to do motion for motion and not allowing everything to mean something.

You know, a right cross to the face—I don't care how big and tough you want to be. That should have some impact, and it's okay to fight from underneath. I love watching the greats like Jackie Chan, who in every fight—no matter what—from the first frame, he fights underneath.

**Jesse Thorn:** What does that mean?

**John Cena:** It means you're at a disadvantage, even if you're technically proficient. Jackie would fight naked and have to cover himself up with a trash can lid. Or he would be in a textile factory and have to keep the machinery going. Or he would put himself at a deficiency. So, he's always fighting from underneath. Now he could fight bigger opponents, and that's an immediate first impression, snap-judgment of, wow, the big guy is going to squash the little guy. But even when he was evenly matched or his technique exceeded the person he was competing against, he would always find a cinematic way to fight from underneath.

And in WWE, even as a heroic good guy or a virtuous baby face, as they would say in that terminology, you always want to fight from underneath. The bad guy needs to get a point where they take control, and you hope the audience is rooting for the good guy to save the day.

**Jesse Thorn:** One of the things that it made me think of—right?—is your wrestling character, who has always been a hero—or a face, in wrestling terminology. Like, I've read him described as a—or read you—described as like a Superman figure. And I would imagine that like one of the biggest challenges of being the hero in that situation is finding a way to make superhero-ness interesting. (*Chuckles.*) Just like it's always the challenge of Superman is like how do you make a guy that can fly and see through walls and is invulnerable to basically everything interesting? It's like how do you make the good guy interesting and still be good?

**John Cena:** So, I think you said something profound there, and that I think is the key link in the chain. You said “invulnerable”. And the way you make any character interesting is vulnerability. And I think vulnerability is an exercise in trust. If I tell you something personal, and we've shared in that in the discussion, we've established a bond. I've given you a little bit of trust, and you've returned that.

So, I think you can be—you can show superhuman strength, persistence, resilience, speed. Whatever talent you're trying to showcase, you can. But I think it's those moments when you connect with the audience on a real level. I was able to be vulnerable with the audience when I started becoming polarizing, when half of the audience would boo me. Now, traditionally in WWE, if this happens, two things can happen. One, you either turn bad—

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You tell the people who are booing, “I hear you, and—you know—I don't like you, and I've never liked you.” And now you're a bad guy. Or you block them out. You pretend they're not there, and you just keep going about your day. I was told to take the second path. But I did it under my own terms of smiling and remaining authentic to self, but also acknowledging that the presence was out there, acknowledging that the critics were out there, acknowledging when they would chant for other wrestlers or half the audience would chant, “Let's go Cena,” and the other half would chant “Cena sucks”. They would, at the top of their lungs, chant that I can't wrestle.

And I wouldn't avoid those. I would lean into that. And in leaning into that, over years, I developed a sense of trust with the audience—good or bad. I told them that I heard them, and I told them that I was continuously trying to be better. And whether I won or lost, that got them even more upset or more happy. But I think it's—how do you create an interesting hero? By somehow being okay to be vulnerable?

You know, a lot of superhero characters—or I see it a lot in WWE. A lot of characters don't want to look weak. They're afraid if they look weak, they won't have the interest of the audience. You can look weak, but what you need to do is: you can connect with the person you're trying to communicate with. And that a lot of that is the courage to be vulnerable.

**Jesse Thorn:** More still to come with John Cena. Stay with us. It's *Bullseye* from [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and NPR.

**Transition:** Thumpy synth with a syncopated beat.

**Jesse Thorn:** Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is John Cena. The wrestler-turned-actor is starring alongside Awkwafina in the new movie *Jackpot!*. You can stream it now on Amazon Prime. Let's get back into our conversation.

When you started becoming a giant man by lifting weights when you were like 12 or 13 years old, did you have the idea that by getting huge you were going to kick people's rears?

**John Cena:** No, as a matter of fact, I did it for self-defense. I was getting bullied and beat up every day.

**Jesse Thorn:** Like, literally every day?

**John Cena:** (*Casually.*) Yeah, yeah, every day. I have always been a bit eccentric, I guess. And I grew up in a small town, but I always found a way to stand out. Maybe because I come from a family of five and just wanted my parents to notice me. I don't know. I don't know. But I always was brave and brash in how I acted and how I dressed.

**Jesse Thorn:** What's an example?

**John Cena:** The time I really—the period of time I really got bullied for how I acted was the early '90s, when rap music kind of burst onto the national scene. And the rayon, the polka dots, the high-top fades—think the original *House Party* movie. Like, that's kind of what was—that was my life on the day-to-day. And I lived in West Newbury, Massachusetts. And the total town population is 1,000 people. And there's no stoplights. So, I was the one person who was into that.

And because of that, because I wasn't in a group of people, it just led to a lot of un comfortable folks with the way that I acted. It maybe it touched some people in the wrong aspects. They just didn't—they didn't get it. So, I got bullied every single day. And I started working out as a measure of self-defense, and it worked.

**Jesse Thorn:** Are we talking about full polka dots, like Kwamé?

**John Cena:** Yeah, that's it. That's it. You bring up Kwamé, like that's the style. So, like, crisscross, wearing your clothes backwards and Bell Biv DeVoe, like the airbrushed overalls and the rayon polka dots. Yeah, that's me.

**Jesse Thorn:** What about all your brothers? I mean, you—as you said, you're one of five. So, it was—you guys rolled pretty deep.

**John Cena:** Yeah, and we're all fairly close in age. But I think my older brother had trouble being accepted in high school as well. He wasn't exactly like—he wasn't exactly the prom king or the captain of the football team. So, every day for high school was tough with him. And we've talked, and he said that, you know, that was a difficult time in his life. And, since, he's been able to start working on the difficulties of that time.

But I initially took a lot of ancillary beatings just for being his little brother. And then it made me kind of not care about what anybody thought. So, his struggle actually helped me be confident enough to be myself, because I was going to get beat up anyway. So, I might as well just go down swinging and be me doing it.

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And we've just scratched the surface, brother-to-brother, to begin talking about that. But I think that's kind of what set the stage.

**Jesse Thorn:** When you were like 13 years old, and you started working out, you had like a weight bench—weight set at your house.

**John Cena:** Yep.

**Jesse Thorn:** How much weightlifting were you doing?

**John Cena:** Every day. Every single day. It would be part of my every day. I would come home from school. And if I would do any after school sports or whatever, whenever I got home—whether it be 2PM, 5PM, 7PM, I would always go in and work out every day, seven days a week. No matter what.

**Jesse Thorn:** Was anybody worried about you?

**John Cena:** No, not at all. I think my parents were like, “Oh, wow, he's over there doing that. I don't have to keep an eye on him.” Keep in mind, again, five boys in one house. (*Chuckling.*) I think my parents were grateful that—you know, if I did do afterschool sports, I'd come home at five and then lift 'til seven. And then like, “Oh, we don't have to worry about John anymore. He's going to be fine.”

**Jesse Thorn:** Were you surprised that you were good at it?

**John Cena:** Uh, I wasn't good at it. And I think that's an important thing to let people know. When people see fluency, immediate fluency is a very rare case. I wasn't good at it. And the great thing about physical training is it's truly an exercise in consistence and perseverance. And I think I was good at both of those. I wasn't immediately strong. I was very small, and then two or three years later, began to gain some strength.

**Jesse Thorn:** Was your goal always to be strong, specifically?

**John Cena:** I think it was just honestly to like, hey, let's try to take control of your own narrative here and stop the abuse. And the byproduct of that was strength. And when I got strong, the athletic coaches took notice. And when the athletic coaches took notice, then I began to play team sports. And when you develop—when you play team sports and you're invested, and you're passionate, your teammates are passionate. And you develop friendships and social circles.

And that... it just kind of—the whole system fed itself. So, my commitment to wanting to be physically strong or look intimidating kind of led me to connect with the sports that I loved, with the social circles that I had, and molded me as a young man.

**Jesse Thorn:** I gotta say, like there's not a lot of people—I mean, maybe it's self-selected by the kind of people we invite on National Public Radio over here. But you know, I don't hear a lot of people say, “I wanted to make working out my life.” I think a lot of people avoid working out. Some people work out to, you know, get stronger for some specific purpose—like not getting their butt beat or being better at a competitive sport or something like that.

But I think like working out in and of itself is a very specific avocation. You know what I mean? As opposed to playing sports or something like that, because it is so individual and so personal, so monumentally hard. And the goal is such an odd goal. I mean, I support it for you, John. Don't get me wrong. (*Chuckles.*) But like, what was it about the act of working out—besides getting better at football or not getting beat up at school or those kinds of things—like, what was it about being in a gym for, presumably working out three/four hours a day, given what kind of muscle man you are, that you enjoyed? That made you want to make it your life?

**John Cena:** Well, I also think that's an interesting perspective of “that's an odd goal”. I think everybody—you know, everybody sees life through a different lens. And you have to realize that when I graduated college, I was 21. I'd been working out since I was 12. So, half of my life on the planet. I probably don't have any memory of anything between—from age four to zero. So, the longest occupation I've had at that point would have been in lifting weights. And it was also something I was passionate about. It was something I did in my free time. It was something—I changed my major for my school.

I originally went as a physical education major, because I thought it would be easy. But I chose a very respected physical education institution. (*Laughs.*) So, I switched to exercise science. When I found out there was a major in working out, I went from just barely getting by in class to debating professors after class was over on breakdown of ATP and the Krebs cycle. Like, I was drawn to it. You know, why does anyone chase their passion? Why does someone become a physicist or a neurosurgeon or—? They're drawn to it.

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And then they just can't get away from it. And it was one of those things where, if you gave me one thing to do every day, I would want to work out. That would be it. And I just think it was—for me, it was and still is the ability to believe that you're capable of doing the deed. And it is extremely humbling as well. You constantly fail. So, yes, there are small goals that



you can achieve, but it is riddled with failure. So, you have to continuously get back up. And I love that.

**Jesse Thorn:** It also hurts!

**John Cena:** That depends. It depends on your goal. Like, I'm 47; I'll be 48. My training now is sprinkled with functional strength, but it's also—it's basically focused on mobility. I want to continue to— Imagine this. I started working out when I was 12. My goal is to be working out when I'm 85. I want to still get in there and do the things I enjoy. So, my workouts aren't the three-hour marathons where, you know, you see videos of bodybuilders yelling 'cause they're in so much pain.

I went through a small phase of that as an adolescent. But because I went to university for that, I was able to study volume training and, you know, workout structure and tempo and recovery and nutrition and all that. So, I only went through like a small phase of the street knowledge of physical fitness and wellness. And thanks to Springfield College, I was able to just kind of take what I learned and craft it to continue to do what I wanted to. And then later on, it completely helped me in the profession that eventually became my vocation, because I was able to use what I'd learned to keep myself healthy.

**Jesse Thorn:** Okay. So, let me ask you this. You're in the heart of the exercise industry in Venice, California. You're also in the one place where being a bodybuilder has career paths that make you a famous person.

**John Cena:** Yeah.

**Jesse Thorn:** Did you have that in mind? Like, when you were watching *Pumping Iron*, were you thinking, "Maybe I could be the next Arnold Schwarzenegger"?

**John Cena:** So, that's a great question. *Pumping Iron* is a documentary made in—'79? Or '75? 1975. Where—and this was the world's best. And still Arnold is, and the people involved, they're larger than life. But you did get a sense of like, man, this might be possible when— And I competed in some bodybuilding contests as a late teen and did very well. And they were all drug free contests. I'm very proud to say that I haven't been able to—or I haven't had to lean on performance enhancing drugs just yet. I want to work out late in life. So, I'm saving that for the emergency fire alarm when it happens.

But the second I got to Venice and saw what a professional looked like was very much the same as the second I got to Springfield College and put on a set of pads and a helmet. And that's what Division III football looked like. So, I could speculate what Division II looked like, what Division IAA, what Division I, and then the pros. I knew as a freshman in Springfield College, I would play in college, and that would be it. And I knew when I stepped into Venice, California, I would never be a professional. I would never earn any money in the realm of bodybuilding, because it was so extreme.

And the 1%, the people who were earning money, not only worked their ass off and had gifts, they just—I didn't look like them. And regardless of how hard I would work, I would never

look like them. At my height, at 6'1", I would have to be 350 pounds. And I was 250 pounds. And 100 pounds just doesn't fall out of the sky. (*Chuckles.*) So, it was very humbling and great, but it didn't shy me away from working out.

**Jesse Thorn:** Were you thinking like—there's other Venice, California, giant muscle man careers, such as wrestler and actor—

**John Cena:** No, no, not at all. I was just thinking like, hey, I dig it out here. Because people are as passionate about this as me. So, I want to try to stay out here as long as I can.

**Jesse Thorn:** So, how'd you end up in a wrestling ring?

**John Cena:** An accident. I didn't—again, I didn't know what I was going to do with my life. I took the California Highway Patrol exam and failed. So, like I tried to be a cop and failed. I worked a bunch of dead-end jobs. I worked the *Road House*/Dalton jobs as a bouncer for bars late at night. And you know, good cash, could keep my lights on, but not a lot of room for advancement. So, I was going to join the Marine Corps. I was—you know, I was living in Venice.

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And the Marines is just in San Diego, and I was going to go join. And the weekend I was going to join, a friend of mine said that he was training to be a wrestler in Orange County and asked if I would want to give it a try. And the reason he asked me—it wasn't just happenstance—is because we always used to talk about wrestling. The reason I started playing sports late in my youth, I guess, is because my dad liked wrestling. He didn't like sports. I grew up in Boston, which is a sports town. The Bruins, the Celtics, the Patriots, and the Red Sox.

I never became a Red Sox fan until I was like 11 years old, which is very rare in that part of the world. I didn't know the Celtics were a basketball team. Also very rare. Like, my dad liked wrestling. We were one of the first houses in West Newbury to have cable, so we could watch all the broadcasts of wrestling. I grew up off of wrestling. My dad would allow us to kick the crap out of each other if we put on costumes and pretended to be characters and there was a championship belt involved.

(*Jesse chuckles.*)

So, I carried that enthusiasm with me to Venice, California. And whenever the WWE would come to town, all the wrestlers would come to train. I got pictures with everybody. We used to talk about every Monday broadcast, every pay-per-view. And he said, “Man, we're doing this. We're actually going to do it. Do you want to try?” And I said, yeah, sure. And once I saw the ring in Orange County—I was literally thinking like, man, maybe I should just join the Marines or pack it up and go home. When I saw the ring, I was like, “I will work whatever job, as long as I can do this as my hobby. This is my new like working out. I want to try to incorporate this—a daily dose of this in my life in perpetuity.”

**Jesse Thorn:** You mentioned that fluency in performing as a wrestler, working as a wrestler. What is a moment when you, a—and I'm going to say this, so you don't have to—a really great wrestler, when do you feel like that sense of fluency or mastery? When do you feel in the zone?

**John Cena:** So, I think our jobs are to be in that fluency zone for anything that a consumer sees. You practice to gain a sense of performance fluency. So, when someone pays money to see you, you don't mess up. Now, that can't come at 100%. Things go wrong all the time, but part of the fluency in our business is to adapt. If something doesn't go according to plan, how do I make it the new plan? And how do we move forward? And I think that's one of the things I love about WWE. It's... there's just—like you said, there's a loose format, and a lot of it is improvisational.

So, things can happen that you didn't expect or couldn't predict, but if you're prepared enough, and if you're confident enough in your ability, you can pivot. And you can be like water, and you can involve everything in your environment into the story you're trying to tell.

**Jesse Thorn:** What's a moment that that happened when you were in the ring or in the arena?

**John Cena:** I had a couple get married during a match.

**Jesse Thorn:** And you were—you did not know that they were going to get married during the match?

**John Cena:** No, not at all. Not at all.

**Jesse Thorn:** Like, did they like run—was it—were they like streakers? (*Chuckling.*) Like, did they just run out and—?

**John Cena:** No, no, no. Someone—a couple in the first set of risers—so, if you think of an arena, there's floor seats and risers. The first set of risers that were visibly on camera to show every audience member. The guy stands up, asks the girl to marry him, says yes. So, now one section understands this. And usually the spread for reaction for an audience takes about a minute. And in about a minute, the whole arena knew what was going on. And here we are trying to do our moves so that people are interested, but everyone's looking at the newly married couple. So, we just worked it into the story.

**Jesse Thorn:** We're going to take a quick break. When we return my guest, John Cena, recently announced his retirement from wrestling. We'll talk about why he did it. It's *Bullseye* from [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and NPR.

**Promo:**

**Music:** Relaxed guitar that builds into a fun, upbeat rock song.

**Jordan Crucchiola:** My name is Jordan Crucchiola, and I love movies. But you know what I might love even more? Talking about movies. And the directors, actors, and writers that join me every week on *Feeling Seen* love to talk about movies too. Like our recent cohost, the writer and director, Justin Simien.

**Justin Simien:** And I love the premise of your show. *Feeling Seen*. I think that's kind of always my goal when I'm making something. Nothing touches my heart more than when someone comes out of my movie and says, "Oh my God, I never thought I would see myself."

**Jordan Crucchiola:** So, hang out with us and geek out about watching movies, making movies, and the ways the movies we love speak to us directly. You might just start asking folks around you, "Hey, what movie character made you feel seen?" We're doing it every week at [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org).

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

**Jesse Thorn:** I'm Jesse Thorn. You're listening to *Bullseye*. My guest is John Cena.

You've been wrestling a long time, and you announced your imminent retirement from wrestling.

**John Cena:** Yes.

**Jesse Thorn:** A lot of wrestlers "retire from wrestling" and don't retire from wrestling—whether it's out of financial necessity or a need to continue doing this thing that they've dedicated their life to. Right? I can only imagine that it was a hard decision to make. Was there something in your body or in your life that suggested to you that it needed to be made?

**John Cena:** No, it was an easy decision to make. Thank you for assuming it would be a difficult one. It was a very easy one. And I think it's one that I've known since I started my career. This thing, this doesn't last. It has to end. Looking at anything—like I said, I think I've had a string of those wake-up calls throughout my existence. Putting on the pads in Springfield College and being like, "Oh, I'm going to play until I'm a senior if I'm lucky. And that'll be my last game." Stepping into Venice and being like, "Oh, this thing I'm passionate about, I'm never going to do it at a professional level." Almost being fired from the WWE, and then seeing every performer of note replaced. And the machine moves on.

Like, no one is bigger than the entity. The only person that really matters is the audience member. Because without them, we shut our doors. So, I've always kind of known it will end. I also was never like the first pick. I was always kind of the last decision. So, I'm not supposed to be there anyway. You know, I couldn't be more grateful. And it's time now to close a chapter for the same reason I just spoke about. Because I will become one of those performers who thinks I can go out there in comfortable fluency, but there's a giant percentage that something might go wrong.

**Jesse Thorn:** How do you know that you might become that person? Is it just you looking at the calendar?

**John Cena:** My last full-time performing year was probably 2017/2018. And since then, I've done a reduced schedule—sometimes only a few times a year, sometimes like 30 dates a year. And each time I come back, I can feel just a millisecond slower. So, here we are—you know—seven years after I began to feel that millisecond. And now that's a couple seconds. And like I said, I try to maintain health and wellness. And now with the focus of my physical wellness, I want to be able to work out when I'm 80. Well, I got to take care of myself.

And half of taking care of myself is, hey, you got to stop falling down as much. So, instead of hang on—whether it's either ego or wallet—for all the wrong reasons, I started wrestling because I wanted to do it out of a passion project. I wanted to do it as a hobby. I was able to get a job, and I made that job my vocation. And now it's time to go. So, instead of hang on and keep everyone guessing and increase the percentage that I'm going to put out bad entertainment, I would like to close the chapter when I feel I can still perform and, in doing so, give a whole year to the fans that have been able to make me who I am and take the year to go across the world and say thank you.

**Jesse Thorn:** I have a friend who works on a TV show with you. A great TV show called *The Peacemaker*. Shoutout to my friend Steve Agee, one of the best guys. And Steve told me that each time you undertake a project, you—in parallel—learn a piece to play on the piano.

**John Cena:** Yeah. Yeah, I try to.

**Jesse Thorn:** When did you start doing that?

**John Cena:** Maybe six years ago? Yeah.

**Jesse Thorn:** What's—I—*(laughs)*. First of all, I love this. Second of all, I can't imagine doing as many hard things as you do professionally and thinking, “I need a challenge in my life.” *(Laughs.)*

**John Cena:** Well, it's a little more complex than that. It wasn't like I need something to do. It was me saying to myself, “I've always wanted to,” or “I wish I could.” Right? I always used to say to myself, “I wish I could play an instrument, and I wish I could play piano.” I'm never going to sell out Carnegie Hall. I'm never going to tear any tickets. I do it for my own enjoyment. It's the same passion I have for working out. And it's something I've always wished I could do.

[00:35:00]

And I've changed it into I'm just going to do it.

**Jesse Thorn:** Do you write raps still at home? You're a pretty decent rapper. You got a notebook?

**John Cena:** Thank you very much for that. Next year, I believe the John Cena and the trademark *You Can't See Me* album turns 20. So, I'm more of a pianist than I am a poet.

**Jesse Thorn:** What piece did you learn when you were making *Jackpot!*?

**John Cena:** *Jackpot!* was Christmas carols. I wanted to learn a Christmas set to play for my mom.

**Jesse Thorn:** Did you play it for her?

**John Cena:** I did. Boy, was it broken. But I learned, “Chestnuts Roasting”, “You’re a Mean One, Mr. Grinch”, “Jingle Bell Rock”, “I’ll Be Home for Christmas”, “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas”.

**Music:** “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas” played on the piano by Brent Weinbach. It continues under the dialogue.

**Jesse Thorn:** Oh my gosh, can I come next year? (*Laughs.*) That sounds great!

**John Cena:** Man, here's the thing, there's only so many parking spots at the mall. Once I tried to learn—because I don't read music; I just play from memory. So, once I learn a piece, the other pieces have to go away. So, I have to—the greatest thing is when you relearn them, you learn them faster. I can get fluency quicker, but the Christmas set's gone. I'm trying to mess around with cocktail jazz.

**Jesse Thorn:** Well, John Cena, I sure appreciate your time. I so have appreciated your work, especially in movies the last few years. You're such a wonderful performer. It's really nice to get to talk to you.

**John Cena:** Thanks so much for the kind words. I appreciate it. And thanks for the time today.

(*Piano swells.*)

**Jesse Thorn:** John Cena, everybody. His new movie, *Jackpot!*—spelled with an exclamation point—is streaming now on Amazon Prime. The beautiful piano Christmas music you are hearing now is not the work of John Cena. We admit it. Instead, it is our buddy Brent Weinbach performing what we think John Cena might sound like when he plays Christmas songs on the piano.

Brent Weinbach, of course, a brilliant standup comic as well as a very talented piano player. He hosts a live streaming podcast type thing called *The Chicken Coop* with his similarly music-talented sister, Laura.

(*Music fades out.*)

**Transition:** Thumpy synth with a syncopated beat.

**Jesse Thorn:** That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye* is created from the homes of me and the staff of Maximum Fun, in and around Greater Los Angeles, California. I had to sell a filing cabinet here at my house on a popular social media site's marketplace app. And, uh, (*chuckles*) I'm just gonna tell you how many messages I got before someone actually came and showed up. The answer is 44. 44 people messaged me and did not show up.

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. Our video producer, Daniel Speer. Yes, that's right! We've got video now. Go find us on YouTube. We get booking help from Mara Davis. Special thanks this week to Claire Reynolds for recording our interview with John Cena in Atlanta. Our interstitial music is by DJW, also known as Dan Wally. Our theme song is called "Huddle Formation". It was written and recorded by The Go! Team. Thanks to them and thanks to their label, Memphis Industries.

*Bullseye* is on Instagram. We have pictures from behind the scenes, video, and more. Find us there, [@BullseyeWithJesseThorn](#). We're also on Twitter, YouTube and Facebook, and we will soon be on TikTok! There on TikTok, we are very demure, very mindful.

And 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 fades out.)*