

**\*The following transcript comes from the original airing of this episode and may vary slightly from the updated audio.**

[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](https://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:** I'm Jesse Thorn. Aside from maybe Dolly Parton, is there any recording artist in America more universally beloved than Weird Al Yankovic? 40 years of making records, millions sold. He has an iconic voice, the chops for pop, and a sense of humor both distinct and approachable. And look, if you're close to my age, maybe sit down for this one. Weird Al just celebrated his 65th birthday. Happy birthday to the GOAT.

When I talked to Al back in 2022, he'd just been the subject of a biopic—*Weird: The Al Yankovic Story*, which he co-wrote himself. True to the biopic genre, it chronicles his life from childhood to present-day, but unlike most biopics, it is not probing or emotional or dark. It is not grounded, not realistic. There are no facades lifted. If you're looking for any of those—I don't know—go watch *I'm Not There* or something. What Weird Al does to popular music, he does here to biopics. It's a very silly, joke-a-minute parody. *Weird* stars Daniel Radcliffe as Weird Al, and Evan Rachel Wood as Madonna, Al's main love interest. As I said, (*chuckling*) the film, not grounded.

Before we get into my interview with Weird Al Yankovic, let's hear a clip from *Weird*. This comes from early on in the movie. In this scene, Al's father has just learned that his son has been secretly playing the accordion, which is a forbidden instrument in the Yankovic household. His dad smashes it to pieces. A wounded, enraged Al replies:

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Clip:**

**Music:** Dramatic orchestral music.

**Music:** Solemn orchestral music.

**Al (*Weird: The Al Yankovic Story*):** (*Furious and panting.*) You—you think you're gonna stop me from playing?! You'll see. One day, I'm gonna be the best—perhaps

not technically the best, but arguably the most famous accordion player in an extremely specific genre of music! I'll show you. I'll show everybody!

**Father:** Get out! Good riddance!

*(The door opens and shuts.)*

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Jesse Thorn:** Weird Al Yankovic, welcome back to *Bullseye*. It's nice to talk to you again.

**Weird Al Yankovic:** You too, Jesse!

**Jesse Thorn:** What was your actual, real-life relationship like with your dad?

**Weird Al Yankovic:** *(Laughs.)* Um, much different than that. Yeah, we tweaked reality just a little bit there. Yeah, my parents were always extremely supportive and sweet. And more or less nothing like *(laughing)* the parents in the movie. But we had to have some drama. You know? You have to have some drama to make a movie. And nobody wants to see an hour-and-a-half long movie about, you know, people that get along really, really well with each other.

**Jesse Thorn:** *(Laughs.)* The drama of Downey and Lynwood, California—pleasant southern California communities.

**Weird Al Yankovic:** Yeah. Actually, Lynwood—you know, when people ask where I was born, I always say Downey. Because I'm—you know—a literalist. And the hospital I was born in was located in Downey. But as soon as I came back from the hospital, I lived in Lynwood.

**Jesse Thorn:** And Lynwood is nice. That's how I would characterize Lynwood. It's nice!

**Weird Al Yankovic:** Yeah! Suge Knight and I went to the same high school. You know. I'm from the hood.

**Jesse Thorn:** At the same time? Did he ever hang out a window?

**Weird Al Yankovic:** Eeh, I'm a little older than Suge, I believe.

*(They laugh)*

**Jesse Thorn:** Did you make music for your parents?

**Weird Al Yankovic:** Well, you know, I played the accordion around the house. And my dad is a World War II veteran, so sometimes we'd get on these jags when Mom was away that we would play old like World War II songs and uh—

**Jesse Thorn:** What is—do you mean like songs from the era of World War II? Or like “Over There”?

**Weird Al Yankovic:** Yeah, like “Over There”. That was a big one. That was a big hit in the house.

*(They laugh.)*

**Jesse Thorn:** Are they the ones that gave you the accordion to begin with?

**Weird Al Yankovic:** Yeah. I mean, you know, that part of the movie is sssort of true. Because even though it seems like it's a conceit for the movie, there was in fact a door-to-door accordion salesman that came around. And this would've been 1966 when—I guess—door-to-door accordion salesman were still a thing to some extent. And he did not get beat up by my dad as he does in the movie. But yeah, that was my parents' idea that—you know—when this guy came around and said, “Does your son wanna take music lessons?” The choices were accordion and guitar. And my parents, being the visionaries that they were, they thought, “Oh, well, young Alfred would love to be an accordion player, because who wouldn't wanna be the life of every party?”

**Jesse Thorn:** This was like a Harold Hill type figure?! He was selling lessons with the instrument? Was he starting a boy's band?

**Weird Al Yankovic:** Yeah, it was like a music conservatory I guess was the fancy name for it. But yeah, essentially selling lessons.

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But part of that was the implicit thing that you would, you know, buy the instrument. So, it was—I think his name was Lee Terry. Lee Terry's Accordion School in Southgate. And I think Lee is still with us, so he's probably going to watch the movie and go, “Hey, that's me!”

*(They chuckle.)*

**Jesse Thorn:** *(Laughs.)* I mean, what did you think about being handed an accordion? 1966 is the—especially in southern California and not, you know, Wisconsin or something—that's the waning days of the accordion in American music.

**Weird Al Yankovic:** Yeah, it was like the year before the Summer of Love. It was not—the accordion was not like considered the hippest instrument.

**Jesse Thorn:** Like, I think there's like maybe eight more years where you could sing "Roll Out the Barrel" at a bar or something, but—

**Weird Al Yankovic:** I know my grandmother was a big fan of *The Lawrence Welk Show*, and we all loved Myron Floren. And in fact, Myron Floren was the first autograph I ever got when I was a young child. So, you know. And again, I didn't really have a barometer on what was hip when I was six years old quite so much. So, I just thought, "Hey! Fine, I'll take accordion lessons."

**Jesse Thorn:** Did you have a barometer on what was hip when you were, you know, 15 years old?

**Weird Al Yankovic:** You know, honestly I don't know if I've ever really had that barometer.

*(They laugh.)*

That's been beyond me.

**Jesse Thorn:** You've had to kind of force yourself to have that barometer, because you can only parody things that people know about.

**Weird Al Yankovic:** I suppose so, yeah. But yeah, that's part of my obsessive-compulsive thing where I would be like studying the Billboard charts and trying to analyze them and figure out, you know, which were the ones that—you know—are making the biggest impact on pop culture, which have the hookiest hooks. But yeah, I suppose in some—to some extent, that's part of my job description.

**Jesse Thorn:** You started school early. Right?

**Weird Al Yankovic:** Yeah. I started kindergarten a year early, and I skipped second grade. I was in second grade, and the teacher just thought I was too advanced. So, they just moved me across the hall to the third grade class. So, as a result, I started high school when I was 12 and graduated when I was 16.

**Jesse Thorn:** I mean, I think about that a lot, too. When I was in first grade, the sort of beginning of first grade they were like, "What if we put Jesse in third grade?" And my parents said no. I mean, I think they considered it, but they ultimately said no. And when I look back on it, I think, "Gosh, I could barely handle being 15 when I was 15. What if I had been 13 when I was 15?"

*(Al laughs.)*

But like, very sincerely, like it—you know, being an adolescent in particular is really hard. And you know, when everyone else has two years of, particularly, emotional development on you, I imagine it's tough!

**Weird Al Yankovic:** Yeah. I think it's tough for anybody. I don't know how much that was a detriment to me. I mean, seventh grade and eighth grade were probably the two worst years of my life, and I'm not sure how much the age difference had to do with that. I think they're tough for everybody. They're tough for my daughter. I'm sure that's kind of a universal thing. I know that I didn't get my driver's license until two years after everybody else. But you know, I can't really blame my lack of social standing with the age difference so much, 'cause I was just a total nerd and a dork. And I don't know that (*laughing*) if I was even the same age as my classmates, if that would've made a huuuuge difference. There was always that divide, because I was who I was.

**Jesse Thorn:** What did being a dork mean when you were in middle school?

**Weird Al Yankovic:** You just got picked on a lot. The bullies, even scrawny, little bullies would pick on you. It just kind of made life miserable for me in general. And no real social life. Even though at that age, I don't know that I was really looking for a social life. But you know, it was just a lot of getting picked on. Which, you know, gets old pretty quickly.

**Jesse Thorn:** What kind of picked on are we talking about?

**Weird Al Yankovic:** Well like you know, they would shove gum—chewing gum into my locker, so that I couldn't open it. They would like swat me in PE class. They would just, you know, poke me. I didn't get like beat up, per se. If anything seemed like it was gonna get violent, I would just run away. I was very—(*laughs*) I had no shame in that. But it wasn't like anything like horrific, but it was just like non-ending, you know, micro abuses.

**Jesse Thorn:** Did you play music with other people when you were in school?

**Weird Al Yankovic:** I tried! (*Laughs.*) You know, I was not in the school band, but I remember like early on—like, when I was like 12 years old, I thought, “I want to put a band together!” And again, we allude to this in the movie. But nobody wanted to be in my band. Nobody wanted to play with me. Nobody wanted an accordion player for some odd reason. Which is why I finally decided, well, I better do this on my own. And you know, of course, like in my early 20s, I finally put together a band. Which is the same band that I have to this day,

**Jesse Thorn:** But Al, you could have thought to yourself, “I should take these skills I've learned to play on the accordion and just learn to play the chords on a keyboard that everyone wants in their band.” (*Laughs.*)

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**Weird Al Yankovic:** I suppose. But that would be haaard. The accordion's basically half of a piano. And I can play the piano kind of, although my left hand is used to playing buttons. So, I can figure out how to play the piano, but it's not something that I'm comfortable doing.

**Jesse Thorn:** Were you playing accordion music on your accordion? I mean, were you—like, when you took an accordion lesson, was it “Roll Out the Barrel”?

**Weird Al Yankovic:** It was! I mean, it was, uh—I mean, they certainly didn’t teach you “Stairway to Heaven” when you take accordion lessons at six years old. It was mostly like traditional accordion songs, like polkas and waltzes, and a lot of classical music. Public domain stuff, obviously.

**Jesse Thorn:** What kind of classical music were you learning to play on the accordion?

**Weird Al Yankovic:** You know, I don’t know, “William Tell Overture”, “Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2”. Just, you know, kind of famous classical pieces like that. “Sabre Dance”. Things like that. But after I—I took lessons for three years, like ages seven to ten. And then I kind of took a break from it. But I was getting into rock music at that time. So, I started—you know—playing along with the songs that I heard on the radio or from my record collection and kind of taught myself rock and roll chord progressions. And it got to the point where I could play along with like a lot of my favorite albums. And when my friends heard me doing this, they thought it was hilarious. They thought, “Oh, you’re playing rock and roll on the accordion.”

So, I learned pretty early on that—you know—there was humor to be gleaned from that juxtaposition. A lot of people just thought that was inherently funny to play rock and roll on the accordion.

**Jesse Thorn:** Did you have an idea of wanting to be an actual entertainer when you were an adolescent?

**Weird Al Yankovic:** I’m sure I had my fantasies. I mean, like every kid like, you know, sings into their hairbrush in the bathroom mirror. And you know. And I was getting some airplay on the *Dr. Demento Show* when I was—you know—in my early teens or mid-teens. And you know, I enjoyed that small dose of fame, but I never really, at that point in my life, thought—you know, “This is my life’s calling. I’m gonna be in show business. I’m gonna be an entertainer.” ‘Cause I was always pretty adult-minded and grounded in reality, and I realized that—you know, an accordion player generally doesn’t like hit the top of the Billboard chart. (*Laughing.*) You know, that’s something that—you know—literally has never happened before.

So, I just thought, “Okay, I’m gonna be an architect.” And when I was 12 years old, I decided, “Okay, that’s what I’m gonna do.” And I—you know—went to Cal Poly San Luis Obispo which has an excellent architecture program. And I went there, and I graduated. And by the time I graduated, it was odd, because I knew that I really didn’t think I was gonna be an architect. I didn’t really have, you know, any passion for it at that point. But at the same time, I still didn’t think I was gonna be able to make a living—you know—in show business. Because that was always kind of a ridiculous notion to me.

So, it was kind of an odd couple of years where I was kind of between having one foot in reality and one foot, you know, in the hope that maybe somebody would sign me.

**Jesse Thorn:** So, one of the plot points in *Weird*, the movie—many of the plot points are pretty straight parodies of the music biopic. There’s also a little bit of, you know, special things to you sprinkled in. One of them is at some point you get advice to just get gigs. Just

play out. Just play in front of people. Was that available to you, as a guy who had an accordion and had had his home recordings played on *Dr. Demento*?

**Weird Al Yankovic:** Not so much. (*Laughs.*) That was not so much of an option. I think—gosh, when I was a teenager, I played in some comedy club, which no longer exists. And you know, like at 2 o'clock in the morning and got zero reaction. I auditioned for *The Gong Show* when I was in college and did not make the cut. (*Laughs.*) You know.

**Jesse Thorn:** Did Paul Rubins ever taunt you? I think Paul Rubins was on *The Gong Show* like 42 times or something like that. (*Laughs.*) Yeah.

**Weird Al Yankovic:** Oh really? (*Laughs.*) Yeah, not so much. Again, I didn't really have a band until in 1982—well, I got my drummer in 1980 and my bass player and guitar player in 1982. So, prior to that, you know, there wasn't really—you know, aside from like playing my cousin's wedding when I was eight years old, there weren't that many like serious jobs for a solo accordion player. Unless I wanted to do like, you know, weddings or bar mitzvahs or something like that.

**Jesse Thorn:** When did you give yourself permission to think, “I can make this my life and not just a thing I do”?

**Weird Al Yankovic:** It was like three or four months ago, I finally thought—

(*Jesse chuckles.*)

No, that's hard to say. But the concrete fact I can give you is that I gave notice at my day job the day that my first song hit the Billboard Hot 100 chart.

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Because part of my day job's job description was that I was supposed to go to the post office every morning and pick up the mail. And I worked for a radio syndication company. So, it was like—you know, I was sort of in the business. I was, you know, business-adjacent.

**Jesse Thorn:** You worked in the traffic department though. You were scheduling advertisements.

**Weird Al Yankovic:** Yeah. Well, I started in the mailroom. And then, I worked in the traffic department. And then, I think—I think I maybe even went back to the mailroom, because I hated having a desk job. It was just soul sucking. But yeah, I definitely remember going to the post office. And there was a *Billboard* magazine in that day's mail. And I just opened it up to the Hot 100 chart, and there I was. It was “Rickey”, the Toni Basil parody of “Mickey”. And I was on the hot 100 chart, and I thought, “Maybe I should get serious about this Weird Al thing. (*Laughing.*) Maybe I actually have a shot at this.”

And I gave my notice, and then I guess I was full-time Weird Al.

**Jesse Thorn:** Even more still to come with Weird Al Yankovic. 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 Weird Al Yankovic—the recording artist behind “Eat It” and “Like a Surgeon” and “Frank's 2000-Inch TV” and many, many more comedy hits—just turned 65 years old. Al's the writer and subject of the movie *Weird: The Al Yankovic Story*. That film is available on the Roku channel. He and I talked in 2022. Let's get back into our conversation.

So, you were listening to the *Dr. Demento Show*, which was—and you know, he remains kind of the central figure of the world of funny and novelty music. And so, you must have known how few career artists there were. I mean, Tom Lehrer had a few successful records, you know, that are good straight through. But then he retired like—I don't know; I don't know how long he did it. Five years or something like that. And besides that, you're like, “Well... Randy Newman.” But he also does a lot of pretty serious stuff. And...

**Weird Al Yankovic:** Yeah, there's not many. I mean, you know, my Mount Rushmore of parody inspirations would include Allan Sherman, who was extreemely popular. But he burned out very quickly from making—you know—a number of very poor personal and business decisions. And Tom Lehrer, you know, very popular. But he just basically walked away. He said, “Okay, I'm done.” I think his famous quote was he decided that satire was dead when Henry Kissinger won the Nobel Peace Prize. So.

*(They laugh.)*

He walked away.

**Jesse Thorn:** His other—his other famous quote was, “What's the use of having laurels if you don't rest on them.”

*(They laugh.)*

**Weird Al Yankovic:** Yeah, you have to respect that. I tried to get Tom for my Saturday morning show on CBS in the late '90s, and even to do like a—I said, “You could be the guy behind the wall we never see, we just hear your voice.” And he just—he's just completely checked out from show business. And he just enjoys doing what he does.

**Jesse Thorn:** He was my professor in college.

**Weird Al Yankovic:** That's right! In fact, I almost went to UC Santa Cruz just because Tom Lehrer was teaching there at the time. But I thought, you know, I better be more practical about it.



**Jesse Thorn:** He said the only good songwriters after—I can't remember. It was like *Leopold and Loeb* or something, one of the greats of 1950s musical theatre. He was like, "The only good ones are Randy Newman and Stephen Sondheim."

*(They laugh.)*

"And everything else is bad."

*(Giggling.)* I was like, "Not even Stevie Wonder or something?!"

*(They laugh.)*

Like, doesn't everyone like Stevie Wonder?

**Weird Al Yankovic:** I'm trying to think of the others. So—and Stan Freberg also had a long career. Although, he kind of segued into advertising. He focused on advertising like halfway through. So, I think the only person that has had like a decades-long career doing comedy music in the last century is probably Spike Jones and the City Slickers, who was popular through the '40s and '50s and slightly into the '60s. So, if I have any kind of role model, *(laughing)* I guess at this point it would be him.

**Jesse Thorn:** It's a really tough job to write songs that hold—that are more than just a gag. Because a lot of times, you know, it's really hard to write comedy—that's so often based on surprise—when you've done it once, and the surprise isn't there anymore. Like, a song that's still funny the second and third time through is a tough challenge.

**Weird Al Yankovic:** It is. It's hard to—that's been a big challenge for me, as my career kept going on and on and on is after 14 albums like how do you, you know, come up with new ways to be funny?

[00:20:00]

I mean, there are only so many tropes and so many comedic devices you can employ before you start repeating yourself. And hopefully I didn't do that a whole lot, but I kind of felt like I was getting to the point where, *(sucks air through teeth)* you know, I don't know how many more angles I can attack something from. So, that's part of the challenge and maybe part of the reason why I've slowed down a little bit in the last several years.

**Jesse Thorn:** I think like album three or four or so, you had run out of foods to write songs about.

*(They laugh.)*

**Weird Al Yankovic:** I noticed—you know—pretty early on that I was like obsessing a lot on songs about food, particularly when my record label decided to—against my wishes—put out a compilation of all my songs about food.

(*Jesse laughs.*)

So, I thought, eh, maybe I should like back off on the food-related puns for a while.

**Jesse Thorn:** Let's hear a clip from *Weird: The Al Yankovic Story*, which was co-written by my guest, Weird Al. And this is a scene that features Al as a record executive, wearing a truly stunning wig alongside Will Forte wearing the same wig. And the character Al Yankovic is there after his first song has been played on the radio, trying to get a record deal.

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Clip:**

**Tony:** I've heard enough.

**Al:** Aaand what did you think?

**Tony:** Do you know why they call it the music business?

**Al:** Uh, why?

**Tony:** Because it's a business!

**Ben:** It's a business!

**Tony:** Use your head kid. Nobody wants to hear a parody song when they can hear the real thing for the same price! (*Stammering.*) What's the point?!

**Ben:** Yeah, makes no financial sense whatsoever.

**Al:** Uh, my—my song was actually a big hit on *The Captain Buffoon Show*.

(*They laugh.*)

**Ben:** What?! *Captain Buffoon*?! Really?!

**Al:** Yeah!

**Tony:** (*Stammering.*) *Captain Buffoon* actually played your song on the radio?

**Al:** yeah!

**Tony:** Well, why didn't you tell us! This changes everything! Ben, Get this young gentleman a record contract this very instant. You're gonna sign him to a 14-album deal.

**Al:** Wait, really?!

**Tony:** NOOOO!

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Jesse Thorn:** (*Chuckles.*) It's a Chinese restaurant menu.

(*They laugh.*)

Will Forte, playing your brother, which I thought was a nice—

**Weird Al Yankovic:** We're supposed to be the Scotti Brothers, which was my actual record company, Scotti Brothers. Tony and Ben Scotti.

**Jesse Thorn:** When I saw you in that wig, I thought, well, gosh. At the beginning of your career, your signature curly locks were not always long and free. They have been since. And they—look, I'm seeing you on a video conference right now. They look gorgeous.

(*Al chuckles.*)

You look beautiful, as always. Do you ever (*laughs*)—like, do you ever cut them off between tours?

**Weird Al Yankovic:** No, I just—I let my hair just grow out of my head. Just right out of my scalp. I rarely even cut it. I mean, the last time I even had a haircut was probably not this year. (*Laughs.*) I don't know. But I just, you know, it's getting a little grayer and thinner all the time, but it's still growing.

**Jesse Thorn:** Yeah! I mean, I am—again—looking at it on the video conference, and you're now 60ish, and you got a lot of color in that hair and a lot of thickness! God gave you a gift!

**Weird Al Yankovic:** Well, thank you! Thank you.

**Jesse Thorn:** You tour with quite a show. I was asking everybody, "What should I talk to Weird Al about?"

One of my producers says, "I have some friends who are dancers, and all they can ever talk about is how the best gig in showbusiness is dancing on the Weird Al tour."

(*Al exclaims, "Oh, wow!"*)

“Because he pays the best, puts people up in the nicest spots, and he’s the nicest guy.”

**Weird Al Yankovic:** Well, that’s so nice to hear!

**Jesse Thorn:** But like, you put on a production. You still do. But I imagine that’s different when you’re 60 than when you are 28. Does it not feel that way?

**Weird Al Yankovic:** No! I mean, not yet! I mean, I can still kick over my head. I still am as physical or attempt to be as much as I was—you know—at the beginning of my career. I used to do the thing—in “Like a Surgeon”—where I put my leg behind my head and dance around on one foot. And I haven’t tried that lately, and I don’t really have an inclination to do that. That seems like that would be painful at this point in my life. But it’s still a very—now, again, this particular tour we’re doing right now is the vanity tour. So, we’re literally sitting on stools and playing. So, it’s a very nonphysical show. But most of my shows—yeah, there’s a lot of running around, and it’s basically aerobic exercise for an hour and half/two hours every night onstage.

**Jesse Thorn:** Do you have to get yourself ready to do that? Like, you’ve been doing it a long time. Is there something that you do in your dressing room or in the green room before you hit the stage?

**Weird Al Yankovic:** Just—you know, just stretching and just vocal warmup exercises. My family’s very used to (*laughs*) hearing me do (*trills up and down the scales*). That kind of stuff around the house. Mostly that.

[00:25:00]

**Jesse Thorn:** Did you have to take singing lessons to learn that stuff?

**Weird Al Yankovic:** I took only a couple lessons. I took a lesson or two from Lisa Popeil, who’s an old friend of mine who also has appeared on many of my albums. And Eric Vetro, who gave me a nice vocal lesson. And I use the recording of that a lot for warmups. So, I haven’t taken like a lot of lessons, but enough to know like sort of how to sing, how not to let your voice get tired. ‘Cause that was always—and to this day is—my biggest concern on the road. ‘Cause if I lose my voice—which I have done!—on the road, there’s kind of no getting it back. Because the only real fix is to just not speak for several days. Which if you’re doing a show every night, obviously that’s not an option.

**Jesse Thorn:** Has that happened to you?

**Weird Al Yankovic:** Yeah. Again, not recently. But like in the ’80s, when I had no idea really how to use my voice? Yeah, I would just sing until I was just croaking. And also, you know, on show days I try not to talk so much, which is why we’re doing this particular interview on a day off. But back in the ’80s, when I was trying to do as much promotion as possible, ‘cause nobody knew who this Weird Al guy was, I would do a show at night. I would get up at like the crack of dawn, and I would do like morning radio shows—you know—all morning long. (*Radio announcer voice.*) “Booger and the Bean with Weird Al!”

You know? It was like—and I'd have to be on and up and loud. And you know, after several weeks of that, I had no voice left. And it—you know, and I learned (*laughing*) you know, the hard way that if I wanna be able to like do long tours, I have to be very, very careful of my voice.

**Jesse Thorn:** So, you write a lot of songs that are sort of pastiches or genre parodies. You know, kind of tribute parody songs, songs that are not direct parodies of a single track but more like an artist or a genre.

(*Al confirms.*)

That is probably as close as you get to writing your own magnum opi—opuses. Why is that? Why is the closest thing to writing your *Life is Good* writing a, you know—what if I wrote a song that sounded like Sparks?

**Weird Al Yankovic:** That's just something that I've always enjoyed doing. I mean, I've written a couple songs early on, which I would say are not in any identifiable style, like the first couple albums. You know. I think the first album was populated with some original songs that just, you know, sound like they were written on the accordion. Because they were. And even in the second album, songs like "Midnight Star", that's not any identifiable style or it's not supposed to sound like anybody, really. But I started really enjoying writing the pastiches to really like put on another artist's skin, as it were, and try to write a song in their style—only more demented.

So, I started kind of gravitating more towards those. So, after a while, pretty much all my original songs were sort of like in the style of another artist. And that's just something I enjoy doing. It involves a lot more work than doing a straight parody, because there's no—you know, there's no solid template. You know, like, "Okay, the song is this long and this many syllables per this line." It's sort of like anything I wanna do. But I've had to study an artist's entire body of work to try to pick it apart and figure out, you know, what are the little idiosyncrasies that define this artist. And it's a really nice little puzzle. You know? 'Cause I get to really—it's a labor of love, too, because I wouldn't do this with an artist that I didn't respect. I just really have to study their oeuvre and figure out like, you know, what really makes this artist this artist.

**Jesse Thorn:** Well, let's take as an example your tribute to Sparks. Sparks can be kind of... hard to categorize, but let's say dance-art-rock band? Something like that? Of the (*laughs*)—most popular in the 1970s and 1980s. Still making great music. Great new music, included. So, Sparks is—you know, one of your more esoteric parody subjects. And I bet one that you parodied because you really love their records. So, what was it about their songs that you picked up on or wrote in Notepad when you were writing your homage?

**Weird Al Yankovic:** Yeah, I mean I love Sparks. I was in the Edgar Wright documentary about them as a talking head. And yeah, ever since I was like 14 years old, I just thought, "This is a really great band. They're also really weird." You know, Ron Mael looked extremely nerdy on the album covers, and I can—I related to that. And yeah, I just—I just love the band.

[00:30:00]

And part of the things I would probably write in my notebook while I was listening to their music was Russell goes into falsetto a lot. Today's Russell's birthday, by the way! I don't know when this is airing, but today as we're recording is Russell's birthday. Happy Birthday, Russell.

**Jesse Thorn:** Happy birthday, Russell from Sparks! Hey, Sparks, come on *Bullseye*. We want you on the show.

Go ahead.

**Weird Al Yankovic:** So, Russell goes into falsetto a lot. He does a lot of arpeggiated things in the music. So, I included that. They're not afraid to go into entirely different styles. There's—I don't remember off hand, but there's some song on their *Indiscreet* album where it's like a marching band thing. So, I have like a marching band section in the song. And obviously, a lot of—it's very synthesizer-heavy. It feels almost like a classical piece. These are all just like ideas that I have floating around, thinking like, "Okay, now if I were to write a song incorporating all this, what would it sound like?"

**Jesse Thorn:** So, do you write a melody sitting down at the accordion or do you start with those kind of aesthetic things? Do you start with those textural things?

**Weird Al Yankovic:** I tend to not write on the accordion quite so much. Because if I do, it sounds like an accordion song, if that makes any sense. So, I try to first envision a melody in my head. Like, I'll just think about a melody, and almost like in a dream state—I write a lot of stuff when I'm about to go to sleep. Or sometimes I'll keep my laptop by the bed, so in case I wake up and have a great idea, I can just make some notes. But yeah, I try to imagine the best version of a melody, and hopefully it'll come to me.

*(Music fades in.)*

**Jesse Thorn:** Well, let's hear "Virus Alert", which is my guest—Weird Al's—homage/parody of the band Sparks.

**Music:** "Virus Alert" from the album *Straight Outta Lynwood* by Weird Al Yankovic.

*Really wanna give you a warning*

*'Cause I found out this morning*

*About a dangerous, insidious computer virus*

*If you should get an email with the subject, 'stinky cheese'*

*Better not go taking your chances*

*Under no circumstances, should you open it*

*Or else it will*

*Translate your documents into Swahili*

*Make your TV record "Gigli"*

*(Music fades out.)*

**Jesse Thorn:** Back in just a second. It's *Bullseye* from [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and NPR.

**Promo:**

**Music:** Playful piano.

**Helen Hong:** You never know what you'll learn more about on the celebrity trivia show, *Go Fact Yourself!*.

**J. Keith van Straaten:** For over 150 episodes, we've welcomed guests like DJ Jazzy Jeff, Audie Cornish, and Andy Richter to tell us why they love what they love and then get quizzed on it!

**Helen:** And past quizzes have included some pretty unexpected topics like:

**J. Keith:** Reverse painting.

**Helen:** The perfect flip turn while swimming.

**J. Keith:** Prince's house party playlist from that one episode of *New Girl*.

**Helen:** And so much more!

**J. Keith:** Plus, our guests meet surprise experts in their topics.

**Helen:** Like the time we met an actual celebrity cow.

**J. Keith:** So, listen to *Go Fact Yourself!* twice a month, every month on Maximum Fun.

**Helen:** Do it for the cow!

**Sound Effect:** Mooing and a cow bell.

*(Music fades out.)*

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

**Jesse Thorn:** It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is Weird Al Yankovic.

You've produced your own records for quite a while. Before that, your records were produced by Rick Derringer, who's like a legendary classic music business studio guy.

**Weird Al Yankovic:** Rock god, yes. Absolutely.

**Jesse Thorn:** Yeah. Played guitar on Steely Dan songs and produced the WWF album in the '80s. Like, just a true, classic music industry dude.

*(Al agrees.)*

What is the hardest sound or aesthetic that you've had to find and reproduce for one of your parodies? Like, what is the thing that you had the hardest time recreating?

**Weird Al Yankovic:** Maybe something in the later part of my career, just because samples become so important later on. I mean, it's not as hard to—you know—emulate just a straight-ahead rock band. But if you're like, you know, trying to copy something that's based on other samples, it's either matter of like finding those samples or trying to make that from scratch, which is sometimes kind of difficult. And you know, my band has been with me since the very beginning. And they know the drill. So, sometimes they will approach the original musicians in the band that we're trying to parody and say, "You know, what kind of effect were you using on that guitar? Or can I borrow the sample that you used for the snare?" You know. They'll do whatever they can to get it as close to the original as they can.

**Jesse Thorn:** I mean, there are *(chuckles)*—there have probably been times that you have had to recreate in the studio like a Dr. Dre production where he had a band recreating a sample.

*(They laugh.)*

[00:35:00]

Like, some of the—some of the richer sample-based hip-hop producers figured out at some point that they didn't have to give up any of their publishing or as much of their publishing. They didn't have to license the recording. They had to give up publishing, 'cause they didn't have to license the recording if they had somebody replay something. And that's a lot of



*(laughing)*—that’s a lot of lines down the... sort of a lot of progressions down the progression of the simulacrum.

So, like Al, I’m a—we talked about this a little bit the last time you were on the show, but like I’m a big hip-hop fan. And there’s a lot of hip-hop parody out there that I am not—that I don’t think is that fun or funny, and that it was especially true—you know—30 years ago.

And I think that the same kind of aesthetic craft that goes into sampling and goes into rapping is like the thing—one of the things that you value most in making your music. And that seems like a reason that you’re able to produce rap parodies that aren’t an embarrassment.

*(They laugh.)*

Like that care that you take. You know?

**Weird Al Yankovic:** Yeah. I mean, you know, I put as much care and effort into every single song. And I enjoy doing rap music because there’s so much for me to play with, lyrically. A lot of pop songs are repetitive or don’t have that many lyrics to them. And that’s more of a challenge, because—you know—okay, you have to tell a joke in six syllables. *(Laughs.)* You know? And with rap music, by and large, there’s—you know—a lot of words! So, if you’re doing comedy, rap is a great genre to play with.

**Jesse Thorn:** It’s also very dense, often though. I mean, there’s a lot of—there’s a lot of hip-hop and rock songs that are like “My Sharona”. You know? “My Sharona” is a great song, no question about it. That song rules. And really, the lyrics are pretty straightforward. You know? You’re really—you’re really talking about a kind of bop-bop-a-dop, bop-a-dop, bop-a-dop situation kind of thing, you know?

*(Al laughs and agrees.)*

And you know, if you’re going to—if you’re gonna write a rap like Eminem, like the density and the internal rhyme scheme and stuff, it’s a real challenge, but I wonder if that is also not exciting for the part of your brain that like really wants to make a chart of something and sort it out into the right order.

**Weird Al Yankovic:** It is! It’s more of a challenge for me, because a lot of pop songs sort of like—when I chart it out, I was like, “Okay, this line rhymes with this line. And that happens like four times.” But with a lot of rap songs—like you mentioned, there’s a lot of internal rhyming, so there’s like—you know, this line rhymes with this line, but this word kind of rhymes with this word, which rhymes with the word on the next verse. You know. There’s a lot going on. So, it is a bit of a puzzle, which I enjoy.

**Jesse Thorn:** So, you made your last album eight years ago—ish—now?

*(Al confirms.)*

And your idea at the time was that because of the timeliness of the parodies that you do, that it would liberate you not to make albums anymore, because you could make as many—you could parody whatever was hot at the moment and not worry about it going cold by the time the album came out, which I think is like a really significant concern in your music when you're putting out a record every three or four years. Now, that said, it has now been eight years.

*(Al laughs and confirms.)*

So, do you think *(chuckles)*—do you think that you're enjoying your laurels?

**Weird Al Yankovic:** As Tom Lehrer would say.

**Jesse Thorn:** That you are—look, you're touring hard, you're working hard, you've made a feature film. This is not nothing.

**Weird Al Yankovic:** Yeah, it's not like I'm retired, but I have not been as prolific in my recorded output as I probably implied back in 2014. I've done a small handful of new compositions, but yeah. It's a combination of me being lazy and not being inspired by a lot of contemporary music. And also, I think the biggest thing is I'm just trying to do other things. 'Cause you know, I've now shown—you know, what I can do as a recording artist, as Weird Al. And you know, I wanted to do a movie. And I'm trying to do other things. And the touring takes up a lot of time, as well.

And I love touring! That's a big part of, you know, what makes me happy. The act of songwriting is not like a pleasure for me. I love having written something. I feel a great sense of accomplishment. But the act of writing is nothing that I wake up and go, "Oh boy! I get to write a song today!" I get so focused. My wife has a thing where she describes me as, you know, walking through the house with like a thousand-mile stare like a zombie.

[00:40:00]

Because I'm so in my own head. And I kind of need to do that in order to write. But it's not necessarily a really happy or pleasant experience. I just—it's just something I need to go through in order to get the finished product.

**Jesse Thorn:** Do you have like a list of other stuff? Like, "Make a movie, act on a television show." That's two you've done recently.

**Weird Al Yankovic:** *(Laughs.)* Yeah, yeah. I mean, not a list per se. I mean, just—I just wanna try other ways to—you know, to be funny or to be creative and are not necessarily like, "Make a parody of the current most popular song." And I like to think I'm doing that. I'm—you know, I feel like I've kept fairly busy since the last album came out. And there's probably gonna be a soundtrack album for this movie. You know, we're talking about that at some point. So, there'll be—you know—some new recorded material out there. But yeah, I just don't feel compelled to now still be obsessing over the Billboard charts and thinking what can I do next. I wanna just, you know, try new things and see what happens.

**Jesse Thorn:** Al Yankovic, I—I couldn't be happier to have you back on the show. And you know, I'll tell you that when I wrote on Twitter like, "Hey, what should I ask Weird Al about when I talk to him today?" Which I do for all our guests. (*Beat.*) I think half of the people who replied to me just said like, "Hey, can you tell him thank you?"

**Weird Al Yankovic:** Aw! That's so nice!

**Jesse Thorn:** And yeah, you've shone so much light into so many people's lives. Just really meant a lot to a lot of folks. So, thanks for these now 40ish years!

**Transition:** Bright, cheerful synth.

**Weird Al Yankovic:** Well, that's so sweet to hear. Thank you.

**Jesse Thorn:** Weird Al Yankovic, happy birthday to a legend. As we said before, his movie is *Weird: The Al Yankovic Story*. It's really funny. You can stream it on Roku and rent it digitally just about anywhere.

That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye* is created from the homes of me and the staff of Maximum Fun—as well as at Maximum Fun headquarters, overlooking beautiful MacArthur Park in Los Angeles, California. As we record this, it is Halloween. I am about to head out and trick or treat with my kids in Highland Park, Los Angeles, and I am dressed as a cowboy.

The 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 editor is Daniel Speer. We get booking help from Mara Davis. Our interstitial music comes from our friend Dan Wally, also known as DJW. You can find his music at [DJWSounds.bandcamp.com](http://DJWSounds.bandcamp.com). Our theme music was written and recorded by The Go! Team. It's called "Huddle Formation". Thanks to The Go! Team; thanks to their label, Memphis Industries.

You can follow *Bullseye* on Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube where there is video from so many of our interviews. So, go there and smash those like and subscribe buttons, share a clip, share a whole interview. Have fun. It's a new project for us. We're really enjoying it. We hope you do too. Search for *Bullseye* with Jesse Thorn. I think that's about it. Just remember, all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

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

(*Music fades out.*)