

[00:00:00]

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

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

Music: “Huddle Formation” from the album *Thunder, Lightning, Strike* by The Go! Team—a fast, upbeat, peppy song. Music plays as Jesse speaks, then fades out.

Jesse Thorn: It's *Bullseye*, I'm Jesse Thorn. So, there's a new book out that I want to tell you about. It's by my guest Jesse David Fox. He is a senior editor at *Vulture*; he's also the site's main comedy critic. The book is called *Comedy Book*, and in *Comedy Book*, Fox writes about the history and evolution of comedy. He covers and talks with greats like Jerry Seinfeld, Ali Wong, Adam Sandler, just to name a few.

But it's not just a history. Instead, Fox writes about comedy as an art form. About the role that it plays in our culture and how the form itself has changed over time and is still changing. It's a great read. Fox is really fun and insightful. I can't wait to get into it with him. So, let's get started. My conversation with Jesse David Fox.

Transition: Bright, airy synth with a steady beat.

Jesse Thorn: Jesse David Fox, welcome to *Bullseye*. I'm very happy to have you on the show.

Jesse David Fox: It's an honor, truly.

Jesse Thorn: Jesse, I think you're the first Jesse that's ever appeared on this program other than myself.

Jesse David Fox: Really?!

Jesse Thorn: Yeah, I think so. I think that's true. I was working it over in my head. I've never interviewed Jesse Tyler Ferguson, who's probably the Jesse closest to the world of this program.

Jesse David Fox: Mm. Sure. Ventura?

Jesse Thorn: I've never interviewed Jesse Ventura.

Jesse David Fox: James Adomian doing Jesse Ventura?

Jesse Thorn: I have had James Adomian do Jesse Ventura on this show.

Jesse David Fox: There you go.

Jesse Thorn: Do you yourself have a theory of what comedy is? What constitutes comedy?

Jesse David Fox: Yeah, I guess I do. At first I was gonna be like no, but then I was like, “I guess the book—” I didn't start the book with a plan, but I did—when I learned about play theory, the theory of comedy which is essentially we have comedy and laughter as a sort of evolutionary descendant of why animals play with each other.

But more than, you know, the benign violation theory or any sort of those types of theories of comedy, what play theory was about was about being in a state, a mutual state, where we are entering in a zone of laughter or zone of funniness or whatever. And to me, comedy is the state. Like, the art form is to create the state. And when you have that state, you can then execute different things.

But like, to me, the job of a comedian is to get people in the place to laugh when the part where laughing happens. And I think when comedy is happening, to be in a comedy audience means to join together, to be in that state together.

Jesse Thorn: That is—like, that joining together is something that is missing from all of the tension-release, all of the sort of technical ideas that came before about comedy. And I often think of my own beautiful wife, a very sophisticated comedy consumer. And she and her closest friends—I remember—laughing together about things, or laughing in response to things other people said, and sitting there and thinking, “That wasn't even a joke! What's going on here?!” (*Laughs.*) And I realized, oh, they care about their social bonds and are reinforcing it through this means.

Jesse David Fox: Yeah! It's actually something I learned interviewing the British comedian, Jamie Demetriou, and he was talking about his show, *Stath Lets Flats*.

Jesse Thorn: Which is a very terrifying and upsetting show. (*Chuckles.*)

Jesse David Fox: I love the show so much, but it's a very silly show. But very often, the characters are laughing together. Which is a thing you often don't see on television shows, because at least in American TV, we're so used to like the characters say funny things, but then we laugh at home, and no one is acknowledging it. But on that show, characters would say silly things, and they would laugh together. She just realized that every group of friends thinks they are exceptionally funny. And it's because in that group, they are so funny together. That's part of why they are a group.

Like, comedy creates in-groups, and like the people who have the same sense of humor become friends. And then you're in that group, and then like your defenses are extremely lowered; you really trust each other, so you don't really need all the other bells and whistles that the comedian artists need to make people laugh. And I think it's not a different thing. The laughing you do with your friends is not different than the laughing you do with comedians. It probably is better, I don't know. (*Chuckles.*) Or like better like socially or spiritually.

But the art form is to create that same feeling of like—you're in the audience, you go—you don't go, “That person's my friend.” Maybe you would, but it triggers the same thing chemically and electrically in your brain or whatever.

Jesse Thorn: Yeah, and that is the essential element of humanity, is—

[00:05:00]

Like, the thing that makes human beings successful despite the like relative, you know, weakness of our teeth in a combat scenario, (*chuckling*) is that we work together to throw rocks. Like, somebody's job is to flush the thing out, and another guy's job is to throw a rock at it.

Jesse David Fox: Yeah, and I think—the thing I think I talked about towards the end of the book is that there's research about if we're going to do missions to Mars, we need a comedian on any ship. And that's based on research on like people who've done long term stays in Antarctica. They don't mean a comedian literally. But they do mean a person who is essentially like if you had a friend, you'd be like, “That guy's a real comedian or, you know, she's like a real cut-up.” Like, that type of person. Like, truly like a person who's particularly funny.

Because otherwise, a group would break down. Like, it would be too tense, and it would like make the pressure of being in a group too much. And you need someone funny to relieve it and to like remind people that they have more in common than they have different from each other.

Jesse Thorn: Is that why George Clooney was in *Gravity*?

Jesse David Fox: I mean, I do think it did work. Like, I think that movie would be intense without like the fact that there's George Clooney periodically being like charming for like a second.

Jesse Thorn: Especially in a context where Sandra Bullock is physically incapable of doing any kind of half pratfall.

(*Jesse agrees.*)

You are a Millennial, as am I. You reproduce evidence that Comedy Central presents that the Millennial generation defines itself above all else by taste in comedy. Comedy is an identity definer for Millennials in a way that maybe bands were for Generation X or before. Do you believe that to be the case?

Jesse David Fox: I think it has transformed—especially now that we see sort of Gen Z's media habits—that sense of humor is more important than anything. Like, because so many of us are broadcasting our existence—and I think comedy, or being funny, is a way to function on the internet, and I think a way to break through on the internet. And I think people follow people they find funny, or things they find funny.

I have to get over that young people like memes. But following memes and the parlance of memes as the vocabulary of how people interact on the internet is, I think, different. Now, how comedians fit into that, I do think they are still operating—they have an outsized importance, because of the ability to share clips. And if anything, comedians' place in social media has only increased, right? That was still—like, when it was really mostly Twitter, and comedians obviously were so big on Twitter. But now, it's so easy to find yourself watching comedy on social media, either by a standup comedian or the sort of like sketches of—I don't know if I'd call them professional comedians, but I guess they've become them.

Like, once you have a kid, as I did recently, you then get a lot of like sketch comedy about like what it's like to be a dad or to be a mom or something like that. And you're like, “Well, this definitely feels like a generationally specific thing.” Like, I don't think a Gen X dad living in Iowa, whatever, 20 years ago was like, “I should do like a little sketch about what it's like to change diapers or something.”

But that just feels like a thing you literally do if you're like trying to be an influencer or just sort of like making jokes about it. And I think that is true.

Jesse Thorn: And it has to take place in a weirdly featureless home.

(Fox agrees with a chuckle.)

Even more still to come with Jesse David Fox, author of the great book, *Comedy Book*. Stay with us. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

Transition: Thumpy synth with a syncopated beat.

Jesse Thorn: I'm Jesse Thorn. You're listening to *Bullseye*. I'm talking with comedy critic Jesse David Fox. He's the author of the new book, *Comedy Book: How Comedy Conquered Culture and the Magic That Makes It Work*.

Let's talk about Adam Sandler for a second. Because as I understand it, Adam Sandler was in some ways the genesis of this book.

(Fox agrees.)

So, how did you end up writing a book about comedy as an art form, starting with Adam Sandler?

Jesse David Fox: Sure, great. So, I've always been a big fan of Adam Sandler. And periodically in my work at *Vulture*, I will have written pieces about, “Oh! Like, *Blended* was like surprisingly emotional.” I found it like surprisingly effective as a person who comes from a blended family. Even though there's stupid jokes—not even “even though”, maybe because there's these stupid jokes, it sort of reaches a different part of you. Or—

Ok, ready?

Jill: Yes.

Jack: I'm very tired. So, I'm going to...?

Jill: Go to the supermarket!

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Jesse David Fox: I realized—I was just thinking about the idea of value systems. I think I literally just learned the term value systems and then became obsessed with it. And I was like, oh, I'm going to do a ranking of all of those movies. But I want to use this ranking, use the vocabulary of ranking to explore the idea of value systems and like what does it mean to say something is better?

So, I did this ranking, and it was like 25,000 words long. And up until that point, I thought I couldn't write a book. It's impossible. It's too long. And then I wrote 25,000 words. And then a friend was like, "That's a third of the way to a book."

And I go, "Well, that is a third of the way to a book. If I just expanded all these blurbs—"

The next thing you know, I wrote a whole book. And in the blurbs, I was able to voice all these sort of specific ideas that I've been developing about comedy and taste and value systems. You know, my blurb about *Jack and Jill* was like 800 words long, and it's like somewhere in the middle. It was an extremely indulgent process. I don't know if it works for what people want out of rankings, but I keep on updating it because he's like my muse in that way. It's just sort of so fascinating how his career evolves and how people's perception of comedy and art in a film career evolve as it relates to him.

So, I mentioned this to a book agent who I've talked to for a variety of years, and the sense that he got was there would be an interest in a book about Adam Sandler, but the type of book people would want about Adam Sandler is not the type of book that I wanted to write. Which is a sort of like meditation on the idea of Adam Sandler, for however many words. And honestly, it was truly my agent's idea to be like, "You can just write a book about comedy, you know."

And I honestly did not think—

"Just me? It's just gonna be my thoughts the whole book?"

He's like, "Yeah." He's like, "Do you think you have enough thoughts for a book?" I was like I don't know. He was like, "Alright, well, write down all the thoughts you have, and write

down comedians you feel like you have something to write about, and see if there's enough overlap.”

And then I did that, and then through the process of writing a proposal, I go, “I guess I could write a book.” And then—and then I did it. (*Chuckles.*)

Jesse Thorn: Let's talk about standup comedy, because that is a lot of your work both on the podcast, on the television version of your podcast, and in the book. Standup is really useful because it is very understandable in that it takes a form that we all understand pretty well, which is just sort of talking. It is pretty—has a relatively high level of auteurship. And it also maps very well against the sort of historical narrative that you're trying to write about, right?

So, let's start with the historical. What are the kind of like epics of standup comedy that you understand as a critic? Like, what do you see when you look at the—whatever we want to call it—75 to 100 years of standup comedy?

Jesse David Fox: Essentially, modern comedy started in the late '50s, insomuch as when we think of like what delineated rock and roll in the '60s was that it was written by the people performing it.

[00:15:00]

And in the late 1950s, with *Inside Shelley Berman*, Bob Newhart, those Lenny Bruce albums, it was clearly autobiographical or coming from their perspective. Opposed to using stock jokes or using things that are basically, essentially stock jokes, even if they're not—they're using the same vocabulary of mother-in-law, or food is bad, but there's not enough of it or whatever.

So, those albums to me, is the most radical shift probably in the history of standup. Because to go from not writing your own material, and it's not your perspective on forward is a huge shift.

Jesse Thorn: It's also performances that are not designed for what is essentially vaudeville. Right? Like, WC Fields has a persona, and he's doing jokes based on his persona, and so on and so forth. But still, ultimately, it's a vaudeville act. It's either hosting—you know, it's about to introduce a horse that's about to come onstage.

Jesse David Fox: Yeah, yeah, it is presentational; it is a service that you're providing yourself. It is not—the individual is not the most important thing you're selling. It is—you're dispenser of the jokes. The audience is coming to see jokes before they see all those other things.

And it's partly because standup existed before the word standup existed. Like, people were standup comedians before they knew they were standup comedians, because they were essentially emcees in vaudeville, or they probably got into it because they could sing. But they're like, oh, you can actually tell the jokes. And the next thing you know, they weren't doing the singing.

But then in by the '50s, you're having people who are being comedians. Now, their backgrounds—when they were kids, they probably thought they might be doing vaudeville or something, but because of post-World War II patterns of people moving out to the suburbs, what happened to sort of American cities where there was creating a sort of culture of sophisticated audiences and coffee shop culture.

So, you know, how they're performing and who they're performing to was a very different thing. And that kind of changed.

Jesse Thorn: You have people who are performing in folk and jazz clubs, where authenticity and improvisation are primary values. They're performing for sophisticated audiences, because the people who are going to shows that are left in cities or who are coming to cities for shows are now sophisticates rather than first generation immigrants who want to see ethnic humor. And they're getting them either through those standard performances in clubs, in those kinds of nightclubs that are not music halls in that way, or on LP.

Jesse David Fox: Yes. Yeah. And the LP, the invention of the LP allowed for both the trend of more intimacy, because you're listening to it in your headphones, and it's one-on-one, and longer. So, you can tell longer stories. Like, if you listen—if you listen to *Inside Shelley Berman*, it sounds so contemporary in a way that you just—the way that—in a way that Mort Sahl and Lenny Bruce do not.

Like, they both kind of still to our brain sound like old. Like, you would not be able to delineate that what he's doing is radical compared to something that maybe is even 10 years prior, but *Inside Shelley Berman* kind of sounds like something that can be like done in UnCabaret or whatever. (*Chuckles.*)

Because it—and it's not like hard jokes. It's like a really nice pace.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Clip:

Shelley Berman (*Inside Shelley Berman*): Stewardi is plural for stewardess.

(*Laughter.*)

I think there are many incongruities in the English language, as far as plurals are concerned. For example, it seems to me that the plural for yo-yo should be yo-yi. How about one sheriff, several Sheriffim? One goof, a group of geef. One Kleenex, several Kleenecees. One blouse, two blice.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Jesse Thorn: So, there is this epic of—there is this creation of what contemporary standup comedy is.

Jesse David Fox: Which I think it peaks with Richard Pryor. The sense of the heart attack and blowing himself up was—to me, like this is modern comedy. This is modern standup. It is personal. It is conversational. It is only coming from that person's perspective, while also exhibiting a lot of the skillsets from the history of standup. It is not like he just was confessing up there, but then not doing funny voices. Like, he was doing all types of things. It is still the Rosetta Stone, I think, for standups after it.

There was, oddly enough, like almost immediately after him, a sort of regression that was the '80s. There was a flood of people kind of doing a more modern version of Borscht Belt type jokes, like very jokey jokes. Now, they might have been writing them on their own, but that was a sort of seismic shift. So, the '80s was sort of a regression, that then the next seismic shift was the early—the late '80s, early '90s in LA. with the rise of Black comedy clubs and alternative comedy.

[00:20:00]

Which, both those movements had a similar, more close relationship to the audience, more conversational, a certain sort of authenticity to it.

Jesse Thorn: The other piece of this change in comedy in the mid to late 1990s is the rise of so-called alternative comedy. So, comedy had always existed, or had for a long time—at least since the invention of comedy clubs in the '70s—had existed as a form that was for people who were going to see comedy. You know, maybe people were going to see Steve Martin in an arena, but like mostly they were going to a club to see comedy, and Louis Anderson happened to be there.

So, alternative comedy was the suggestion “what if we don't only do comedy in comedy clubs for strangers?”

The first time I ever had a guest booked on this show that I was really excited about was David Cross. It was probably 2000. He was doing a tour. He was coming through Santa Cruz, where this show was based; I was in college at the time. And it was the first tour that anyone had ever heard of, of a standup comic playing non-clubs. He was playing rock clubs.

That is like a really transformational thing: both the idea that you could do it outside of a comedy club and the gatekeeping of comedy clubs, and also that you could perform for people that wanted to see you in particular, or the kind of thing that you offer in particular.

Jesse David Fox: Yeah, I mean, the comedy club comedian—which many comedians of all types end up having to become, because that's how you can make money—what we're describing is the job of a standup comedian. And if it is your job, then I guess you have to do it, because that is what you're going to be paid to do.

And my focus, and I think what alternative comedy re-brought into focus, is the art of standup comedy. Which is personal expression, right? You're not just doing a service. You're not just providing people the comedy that they're expecting, you're expressing yourself. And during the '90s, there just was a real space for that, to do that. And it was very exciting to not focus on the type of things that would work and try to figure out what works. It's not a rush to figure out what would work, but figure out what you wanted to say.

And a lot of this sort of—especially in the '90s, alternative shows would develop a sort of allergy to too much performance. This sort of feeling like “you're not connecting to us; you're performing at us.” But I do think without that, standup would have just become like a novelty, like magic or whatever it became. Just sort of like a thing you sort of do once a year as like a fun lark and not a cultural force that it has become.

Like, even comedians who you think of as the clubbiest comedians now are benefiting from the value systems that were developed during the '90s by the alternative comedian. Like, it really freed people up to not have to do hard jokes. And I do think like a lot of the biggest comedians like touring acts are doing like longer stories or things that—maybe they're not as deep as people were going in the '90s, but the goal is to try to reveal something of yourself.

Jesse Thorn: And also, you know, if you assume that surprise is central to comedy, if you assume that sophistication is defined by like having seen it all before, then to surprise a sophisticated audience requires innovation. But that can't necessarily take place in a context with an unsophisticated audience, right? Or at least it's a lot harder to do.

And there is like value in creating something new, creating something special, and creating something for sophisticates. I'd like to go to the Art House movie theater and see Art House movies. Doesn't mean I don't like *E.T.*; I also like *E.T.*.

Jesse David Fox: I think what's really interesting is all types of comedians describe their fans as comedy nerds now. Like, Bert Kreischer goes, “You know, it's really great touring with whoever. You know, their fans are really comedy nerds.”

And you'd be like, “What?” Comedy nerds are only supposed to be this little subsect. And because of the access to so much—

Jesse Thorn: Yeah, we were all at the Independent to see Stella!

Jesse David Fox: Yes, exactly. I mean, it's like it used to be effortful to become a comedy nerd, because you had to go out. And the only place to see these things—you did not have access to these— You had to buy, you know, Paul F. Tompkins record at a store. You couldn't just sort of—

Jesse Thorn: You had to go on ASpecialThing.com!

(Fox agrees with a laugh.)

Read weird stories that Dino Stamatopoulos posted.

Jesse David Fox: Right? And now, just everyone has access to an amount of comedy—the streaming era revealed that people wanted to see standup specials. By the time—like, the year before the streaming era, the comedy special was at its like least valued in entertainment it probably ever has been. The amount of people who were being paid for Comedy Central specials was very, very, very little.

[00:25:00]

But you just did it because like you had the hour, you might as well take the money; maybe it'll help you tour or something like that. What the streamers realized is people want to laugh when they're in the mood to laugh. They don't want to be flipping and see a standup comedian be like, “Uhhh, okay, I'm ready, I have time.” They want to be like in the mood to laugh, they turn on a standup special. And then they have access to every comedian that's ever existed.

You can go listen to Shelley Berman and then go listen to Jay Jurdan, an extremely contemporary comedian, and you could decide if they're in vocabulary with each other. That just did not exist even when I was growing up! So, then it does make it so, ultimately, the audience is going to want something unique and different from the things that they've been able to have access to.

And most comedians in the form of standup, the thing that they have most unique is just their self. That is the thing that they have that is different from everybody else, is their self. Like, a lot of the topics you're going to be talking about are going to be the same topics everyone else talks about if you're talking about your life. But they are you. And like, my goal with the book, or almost literally every single thing I do, is to think of comedians as individuals, and that they are expressing a specific point of view. And it's less about what they talk about, and more about how they talk about it.

Just like any other art form, you don't judge the impressionists by what was in their still life; you judge it by the nature of how they painted the still life.

Jesse Thorn: We're going to go take a break. On the other side, we'll wrap up with Jesse David Fox, author of *Comedy Book*. Among other things, we'll talk about how social media has completely transformed standup. It's *Bullseye*, from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

Promo:

Jackie Kashian: Jackie Kashian. Hi, and welcome to the MaximumFun.org podcast, *The Jackie and Laurie Show*, where we talk about standup comedy and how much we love it and how much it enrages us.

Laurie Kilmartin: We have a lot of experience, and a lot of stories, and a lot of time on our hands. So, check us out. It's one hour a week, and we drop it every Wednesday on MaximumFun.org.

Transition: Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

Jesse Thorn: Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. I'm talking with Jesse David Fox. He's a comedy critic at *Vulture* and the author of the new book, *Comedy Book: How Comedy Conquered Culture and the Magic That Makes It Work*. Let's get back into our conversation.

I want to ask you about how the current moment has changed. And when I say the current moment, I don't mean like Trump being president or something like that. That has obviously changed comedy in some ways too. But I'm thinking more of how the media of comedy has changed.

So, obviously, standup comedy for many years was consumed two basic ways. One was in a standup comedy club or, in rare instances, in an arena or something. And the other was on record or special.

Jesse David Fox: Mm-hm. Or a late-night show.

Jesse Thorn: Yeah. Or a late-night show. Thank you. Today, comedy is consumed, I think significantly—maybe even more than in any other form—in social media. What makes good social media is very different from what makes a good nightclub performance. Standup comics complain to me all the time about how them just like calling an audience member dumb is 75 times more popular than them having written 10 perfect jokes that kill everywhere.

What is the effect of people consuming comedy, including specifically standup comedy, mostly through TikTok or their Instagram stories or whatever?

Jesse David Fox: I'll start with the benefit. And I've talked with comedians who've had success in the realm of clips and crowd work. Which is, you're reaching often an audience who do not consume comedy otherwise, for whatever reason. Maybe they live in a place where there's not comedy clubs. Maybe they're too young. Maybe they always thought comedy wasn't for them, because of whatever negative perceptions of comedy they had, or the only comedians they saw were not for them.

And it has proven, unlike previous social media, that like Instagram and TikTok helps comedians build live audiences. People are coming out for it. And I think Nimesh Patel said like, "You have an opportunity to teach them what comedy is."

Now, when I spoke to him, he said audiences in his experience were not coming to shows wanting to be clipped.

[00:30:00]

And in the time since—and in my personal experience—I will say that has shifted. And people are going to certain shows, going to be clipped. Like, you'll watch Matt Rife, not his Netflix crowd work show, but his last YouTube crowd work special, and you truly see like a person in a hell of their own making. It's not only that these crowd work clips are bad for regular standup, they also have made crowd work seem like it has to be bad. Like, that they are demanding an instantaneous reaction.

It's not—if you get a perfect crowd work situation where a person is like a peculiar individual, but they're not trying to be funny, they're just being themselves, and the comedian is able to help them tell their story and say jokes on the side, and we all feel more connected or whatever as a result? That actually does not work. That is—if anything, a comedian who wants to do crowd work would know if it's going on too long that I need a button on this, and I need to end this.

So, it creates a thing that I'm having a really hard time with personally. And I think it can't last forever, because nothing has. Comedy has not been killed. This quote/unquote “second comedy boom” has now lasted for like 16/17 years or whatever. At that point, it just is.

But the thing that makes me sad or concerned is people going to comedy shows to be individuals. To not be an audience, to go in—because the thing that Matt Rife explained is people want—their goal is to go to the show, have him crowd work them, so then he posts it. And then they could comment, “That's me,” or something, and then they will get a bunch of followers as a result. And that amount of transaction and sort of cynicism like breaks my heart. And I can't talk about it too much without crying, because it really is scary if that is how it keeps on going.

But it's completely antithetical to my goal and what I think is the highest power of what this art form can do. Which is a bunch of strangers go in, and the comedian helps them figure out the things that they can laugh together about. People that have—they have their brains work completely differently, and a comedian is able to figure out a combination of things that they all laugh together, and they are a unit. And that, to me, is spiritual. It is my favorite experiences, to be in audiences and have that happen.

And I do think social media is created to turn people into individuals, and that has many negative effects to our society. (*Chuckling.*) But one of them, and maybe a small part of it, is it makes people maybe worse audience members. And it's hard to tell comedians they're doing anything wrong, because they're getting fans, and it's good for comedians to have fans. Because ultimately, they get to be individuals as a result, and I do think probably somewhere—you can extend the sort of still life metaphor to this—which is like, they do crowd work, but it's in their way.

But that's not what social media is rewarding. They don't want you to do crowd work but in your way, really. They want you to do crowd work in exactly the way that blows up. Which is like try to find an issue that half the people will be mad at you for talking about, and half the people will be mad at those people being mad at, and then they fight each other in your comments for a couple days. That is the goal, and that is very different than the goal of bringing people together under the joy of laughing.

The comedian posts these clips and probably has removed some of themselves from the comedy to do these clips. But then to build a fan base, that self needs to then exist outside of these clips, right? It's sort of essentially turning comedians into influencers who, what they—their skill set is making clips. And I don't know where that ends. And I don't know what that means for the art form, right?

If we think of the art form as not an art form, but just sort of like the skillset a person has that you like and find interesting, and the art that you're consuming is the presentation of an interesting life? I don't know where that leaves us in terms of like the beauty of someone like telling a story in an interesting way that is both funny but like poignant or reveals something about society.

But I have to believe—because otherwise, I would I guess quit and never do this again—that people will start figuring out how to take this state and like really express themselves and really turn it into something that feels like a creation and not just sort of a parasocial relationship with a guy who can do trick shots but it's crowd work. Right?

Like, that's the scariest version.

[00:35:00]

Which is comedians become just like—crowd work compilations are the same thing as watching people shoot basketballs, but it's a football, and they're on a hockey rink or whatever those things are.

(They chuckle.)

Jesse Thorn: Jesse David Fox, I'm so grateful to you for taking the time to talk to me. I'm so grateful for *Comedy Book*, your new book, and your work in other media as well. And thanks for taking the time.

Jesse David Fox: Thank you for having me. It was an honor.

Jesse Thorn: Jesse David Fox, everyone, his new book, *Comedy Book*, is great. It's a really fun read, and I learned a lot. You can buy it at your local bookstore or on [Bookshop.org](https://www.bookshop.org). He is also podcast *Good One*, which is really great. I listened to two great interviews recently that he did on that show, one with Katt Williams and one with Mike Myers. Both were recorded live at the *Vulture* Festival, which Jesse helps produce, and both were totally fascinating and insightful.

Transition: Exciting, thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

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, as well as at Maximum Fun HQ overlooking beautiful MacArthur Park in Los Angeles, California.

As we record this, much of our hometown of Los Angeles is either burned or on fire. It is really upsetting and terrifying. And overwhelming, frankly. If you're in Southern California, I hope that you will join us in working on mutual aid projects—whether that is hosting a friend, handing out some masks, or just giving some no strings attached money to a friend who has lost something. If you are not in Southern California, we have been hearing a lot of requests about “What can I do? Who should I send some money to?”

One great way to support the folks who are suffering and support the recovery efforts is through the California Community Foundation, who have a wildfire recovery fund. California Community Foundation is an incredible resource here. They fund a lot of local community foundations as well. That fund, that wildfire recovery fund, covers both immediate disaster needs and also longer-term recovery efforts on a local basis. That's California Community Foundation, very highly rated charity. They do a lot of great work. You can find a link to that fund on their website, which is [CalFund.org](https://www.calfund.org). That's [CalFund.org](https://www.calfund.org). Of course, one of many, many ways to help. But if you need one, that's a good one.

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 is Daniel Speer. Special thanks this week to the crew at Nine Tree Studios in Bristol, the United Kingdom, for recording our interview with Nick Park. We get booking help on the show 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](https://www.djwsounds.bandcamp.com). Our theme music was written and recorded by The Go! Team. It's called “Huddle Formation”. Thanks to The Go! Team. And thanks to their label, Memphis Industries.

You can follow *Bullseye* on Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube—where you will find video from just about all of our interviews, including the ones that you heard this week. Seriously, go out there, subscribe to us on—if you're on TikTok, subscribe. Follow on TikTok. If you're on Instagram, follow us on Instagram. And if you're on YouTube, follow us on YouTube. Smash those like and subscribe buttons. You know how it is. I mean, even if you're only a podcast listener, go hit subscribe. Pick out some interview that you really liked, and send it to a friend who might enjoy it. Please?

Okay. 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](https://www.maximumfun.org) and is distributed by NPR.

(Music fades out.)