

[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:** It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn.

What's it like to work with Pee-wee Herman? I mean, you probably know what it's like to watch Pee-wee. Whether it's *Pee-wee's Playhouse* or *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* or *Big Top Pee-wee*, or just maybe Pee-wee on *Letterman* or something. It is a unique, kind of magical experience: a world where anything can happen. You talk to a chair; you dance and sing with Little Richard, marry a bowl of fruit salad. But what was it like to work with Paul Reubens, the man behind Pee-wee? He passed away a couple of years ago.

Well, between something like 2017 and 2021, I got to work with him. We made a radio special for the public radio station KCRW. One hour of radio, and it took four years. It was exciting, stressful, frustrating, bizarre, and—frankly—nothing in the world could make me regret all that time and effort that it took. Both a nightmare and one of the highlights of my career. My guest, Matt Wolf, got to work with Paul right around that same time—only Matt wasn't making one hour of radio. He was doing a feature length documentary about the life and legacy of Paul Reubens.

*Pee-wee as Himself* premiered on HBO a few weeks ago. It's a beautiful movie about one of the most brilliant comedy voices of our time. It captures everything that was special and frustrating and amazing about Paul Reubens. I'm so excited to get to talk with Matt. Here's a clip from *Pee-wee as Himself*. This is Paul talking about *Pee-wee's Playhouse*, plus an interview with one of the child actors who appeared regularly on that show, Natasha Lyonne.

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Clip:**

**Paul Reubens (*Pee-wee as Himself*):** They could just jump into the TV and jump into a world that was like really full of beauty and fun.

**Music:** Quirky, playful music.

**Pee-wee:** Come in! Hi, Elvis. Hi, Cher.

**Children:** Hi, Pee-wee!

**Natasha Lyonne (*as a child*):** We've got a new member!

**Natasha (*present day*):** I think it was almost like I thought I was inside of a cartoon or something. I don't know why they thought I was an eccentric or would fit in at all. Uh, yeah. You know, a little tiny Paul Giamatti. I do remember being on set, and that it was the most exciting thing I'd ever done. I think it felt like permission to be myself.

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Jesse Thorn:** Matt Wolf, welcome to *Bullseye*. I am so happy to have you on the show, and thank you for this film.

**Matt Wolf:** Thank you for having me.

**Jesse Thorn:** How did you get into this project, making a film about Paul Reubens?

**Matt Wolf:** Well, you know, as documentary filmmakers we're always asked, "Who would be your dream subject?" And my answer was always Paul Reubens. I always wanted to make a film about Paul, but I knew—frankly—very little about him. But I came of age with Pee-wee Herman and, you know, I think intuitively sensed that the impact of that show was sort of in my DNA; it really gave me permission to be an artist or to be different. And you know, I—for various years—kind of pursued connecting with Paul unsuccessfully. But then there was a rumor in trade publications that the Safdie brothers were working with Paul on his, you know, long-rumored dark Pee-wee movie—a script that Paul had written, I think, decades earlier.

And I knew Josh Safdie, so I reached out to him expressing that I've always wanted to make a documentary about Paul. And he said, "Well, we're not working with him. That's a rumor. But you know, let's see." And then, you know—fortuitously, my producer, Emma Koskoff, was approached by Paul. He wanted to do a documentary, and he was looking for advice.

And she said, "Well, there's this rumor you're working with the Safdies. Why don't you go to them?"

And those guys sort of matchmade Paul and I. And this was during the lockdown of the pandemic. And we kind of had an initial zoom in which Paul said what he says, basically, at the beginning of the film: "I want to direct a documentary myself, but everyone's advising me against that, and I don't understand why."

And I said, "Well, I'm here to talk to you about me directing the film. Why don't we get to know each other and maybe conceive of an approach that might make sense for you." And

that began a pretty epic process both to convince Paul to be a documentary subject, but also a very involved process of making the film before he passed away.

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**Jesse Thorn:** You know, people, when you have an interview show, often ask you, “Well, who's your dream guest?” And I had the same relationship to Paul's work that you did. He was always my dream guest. And maybe like *(sighs, thinking)* 12 years ago—something like that—my producer, Julia, said, “You're not gonna believe this, but we got Paul Reubens.” He was in a hotel room. He was on the road. So, we did what we call double-ender. That's where—in radio—you send a recordist to someone. You talk to them on the phone, but they have a microphone pointed at them, so that you can have mic audio on both sides. And *(laughing)* he wouldn't let the microphone guy point the mic at him. It made him uncomfortable!

And I'm on the phone with Paul Reubens like, “Hey Paul, we kind of gotta get the microphone pointed at—” *(Laughs.)* He finally let us point the mic at him, but from like four or five feet away. So, we were worried that this sound wouldn't even be good enough to run on the air. Right? Our dream interview.

When did you realize that that was going to be part of the process of making this film? And I don't mean that he didn't want microphones close to him, but rather that he wanted to be the boss of himself.

**Matt Wolf:** I mean, I realized that within the first few minutes of speaking to him.

**Jesse Thorn:** Did you realize the gravity of that? I mean, I think it would be normal for you to have a meeting with a documentary subject and to have them say, “Well, prove to me that I can trust you.” When did you realize that this was more than that?

**Matt Wolf:** *(Chuckles.)* Immediately.

*(Jesse laughs.)*

I knew immediately that Paul's kind of needs or expectations or concerns as a documentary subject were unlike anything I had encountered before. And to some extent, I understood why. I mean, Paul's somebody who lost control of his personal narrative in the media, and a lot of his desire to make a documentary was, as he says in the film, to set the record straight, to tell the factual story of his life. But you know, I certainly could do that. I could help him do that. That's sort of the easy part. I think the deeper thing that he wanted but maybe wasn't able to articulate was to be seen as an artist, and for people to appreciate—in a deeper, more intellectual light—all the inspirations and thinking that went behind his alter ego.

But also, Paul's somebody who made a decision to just completely separate his self from his alter ego. And I think he felt, for whatever reason, that it was time to let people see his authentic self. And I think that was the scary part. But I wanted to help translate for Paul. I wanted to advocate for Paul and support him, but that didn't mean I wasn't a threatening

presence. And that didn't mean that there wasn't a power struggle between us. Because I'm also protective of my work, just as Paul was—without a doubt—protective of his life and his story, which he had never shared before.

So, I would say immediately it was clear that Paul's desire for control and also reservations about the documentary process were unprecedented for me and for other colleagues of mine that I've spoken to. And I knew I was in for an unconventional ride.

**Jesse Thorn:** I think one of the most powerful moments in the movie for me—and this is an odd choice, I know—is there's a moment when the painter Wayne White, who worked both an artist and as a puppeteer on *Pee-wee's Playhouse*, basically says (*laughing*) it was a nightmare working on the show, and also that he thought it was great to work on the show. Like, he just says it without any—he's a very sort of sweet guy, but he says it with no vindictiveness or even anger. And that is something that is a hard thing to express or capture.

**Matt Wolf:** Well, you know, I tried to follow Paul around in his day-to-day life, and it just didn't work. You know, being controlling, Paul wasn't able to just let a camera follow him around. He wanted like a shot list of what we were gonna film. It just didn't work. But when we finally sat down to do what would become, you know, an epic interview over the course of 40 hours—

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On the first day, he just started to tease me and to rebel against the interview process. To procrastinate, making noises, making faces, jokes. And I thought, “Oh my god, this is gonna go on literally forever.” And then, you know, halfway through the day I thought, “This is who Paul is. You know? He's in real time enacting his resistance to the process of sharing himself. He's grappling with his own vulnerability.” And he is a rebellious, mischievous guy. So, I started to think of this as interview *verité*, something I hadn't ever considered as a device before. And so, throughout the film there are these sort of interludes in which we show Paul and I interacting and him really resisting my questions and reflecting on how strange our relationship is and what his relationship to control looks like.

So, I think in terms of trying to represent the difficulty or the complexity of the process of telling Paul's story, I tried to show in a more raw way what our conversational dynamic was. And sometimes it was dicey, but also thrilling. And deeply funny, but also super vulnerable. And that huge, dynamic range of emotions, I think it comes across in the film, and I think it renders a complex portrait of Paul.

**Jesse Thorn:** We're gonna take a quick break. When we come back, more with Matt Wolf. He's the director of the documentary *Pee-wee as Himself*. It's *Bullseye* from [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and NPR.

**Transition:** Bright, chiming synth with a syncopated beat.

**Jesse Thorn:** Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. I'm talking with Matt Wolf. He's a documentarian who's directed the films *Spaceship Earth*, *Teenage*, and *Wild Combination: A*

*Portrait of Arthur Russell*. In his latest film, *Pee-wee as Himself*, he interviewed and profiled Paul Reubens, the man behind Pee-wee Herman. Reubens died in 2023. *Pee-wee as Himself* is streaming now on HBO Max.

You came into this as one of the, you know, millions of Americans between the ages of 35 and 55 for whom Pee-wee was like a life-changing force. What else did you know about Paul and his life, besides *Pee-wee's Big Adventure*, *Big Top Pee-wee*, and *Pee-wee's Playhouse*?

**Matt Wolf:** I knew about his background in the Groundlings, that he had gone to Cal Arts. I personally was familiar with what kind of things were happening at Cal Arts during the kind of conceptual art/interdisciplinary arts heyday of the late 1970s. And I obviously knew about his arrest and the media controversies that surrounded him. But in terms of the constellations of inspirations that fueled Pee-wee or the kind of sense of humor that was unique to Paul and separate from Pee-wee, I didn't know any of that.

And in fact, when I first met Paul, there was a certain weirdness to feeling like, “Oh, I'm meeting somebody I don't know anything about. I'm not talking to Pee-wee; I'm talking to Paul Reubens, and he's not someone I know, and I don't know much about him.” So, you know, I wanted to get to know him and to understand how he works and what he thinks about as an artist. And it was a long process to get to know that. But a fascinating and—like I said—thrilling journey.

**Jesse Thorn:** Were you nervous to go into a conversation that big with as little detail about him as he had revealed publicly to that point?

**Matt Wolf:** Well, there were hundreds of hours of conversations that happened before that interview. I mean, after that initial zoom, we really started to zoom regularly. You know, it was during the lockdown; there was nothing else happening. And a lot of it was us feeling each other out. Me being like, “Is it even workable to do this project together?”

But also I think through that initial getting-to-know-you period, we realized that we had a lot in common in terms of our interests and sensibilities as people. But also Paul would have a lot of concerns that he would express, and I tried to give him as much information as I can about the documentary process.

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After a few months, he kind of begrudgingly agreed to proceed with the documentary on the condition that there would be a 30-day trial period to see if he felt comfortable working with me. I was like, “Really? We've talked for dozens of hours.” And the 30-day trial started, and I couldn't get ahold of him!

*(Jesse laughs and agrees.)*

And I ended up—I finally got ahold of Paul, and I said, “If I'm on a trial, we're talking three days a week.”

And with Paul, there was no 10- or 15-minute conversation. Every conversation was like one and a half to two hours, like minimum. And we just started to talk, you know, six to ten hours a week. And we also made the decision to start recording those conversations just for reference, but also because we thought our relationship might be interesting. It might be something to look at. And so, over the course of my 30-day trial—*(chuckles)* it really was sort of like an epic pre-interview—you know, Paul and I would shoot the *(censor beep)* and kind of just talk about this or that. You know, me kind of assuaging concerns or anxieties he was having about what a documentary would be and what the process is. But then he would go into the mode of kind of transmitting information to me that other people didn't know.

And slowly but surely, he agreed to do an interview. And I showed up, determined to do what I do with somebody who was very uncomfortable with the process but also an incredibly dynamic storyteller who approached being interviewed like an overachiever. I've never experienced somebody so determined to relay as much detail in as engaging a way as possible. But there was a competitive dynamic. I mean, you know, I said to Paul before the interview shoot, "Most people I interview in a long-form way—you know, five hours is sort of the limit people start to get tired around then."

He said, "I'm not gonna get tired. You're gonna get tired."

I said, "Well, actually, I'm not gonna get tired. I could literally do it forever."

He said, "Okay! We'll see."

So, it was not the normal interview process, even though I showed up prepared. There were a lot of curve balls, but I think I was able to lead Paul in ways to make some connections that he may have not made himself before.

**Jesse Thorn:** To what extent did you have his queerness in mind when you were preparing to talk to him or thinking about the film ahead of time?

**Matt Wolf:** It was important for me to discuss it, and Paul had made a commitment to himself—and I guess to me—to come out. That was something he wanted to do, and I wanted to help him do that. I'm gay, and a lot of queer people really, really connect to *Pee-wee's Playhouse*. But even more so than Paul's arrest, I think his biggest anxiety was coming out—and even more so, a concern that I might focus too much on his sexuality. You know, there was an interesting intergenerational dynamic between us. Me, being a gay person who's 42 and came out in my teen years in the late '90s, and him being in his late 60s at the time, growing up in the '50s, he didn't want to be defined by his sexuality. And I think many people assumed or knew that he was gay, but he had never come out publicly.

And you know, the most intense and powerful day of the interviewing was when Paul came out. And in a way, he was sort of beating around the bush and kind of squirming as I was asking him questions related to his sexuality. And then, you know, the way I filmed this interview is with an Interrotron; it's a device where the interviewer sits in a separate room and is filmed, and then your face is projected over the lens, so that your subject can look directly into the lens. And I wanted to create conditions similar to FaceTime or Zoom, because that

was primarily how Paul and I got to know each other. And so, I could tell he was uncomfortable, and we weren't getting anywhere.

And I said, "Let's take a break."

And he came into the room where I was being filmed for the Interrotron, and he said, "I don't know how to do this."

And I said, "Just say 'I'm gay'. You know? Just say 'I am gay'."

And he's like, (*hesitantly*) "Okay."

And he went back and sat down. It was more of the same slippery stuff. And then, you know, I said, "Paul, are you gay?"

And he made a joke as—you know—he should have. It was a ridiculous question in a certain way. And then slowly we started to have a more personal and deeper conversation, particularly about a relationship he had at the end of his time in Cal Arts.

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You know, really the great love of his life—and subsequently, his decision at the end of that relationship to go back into the closet. And Paul was really vulnerable when he did that. And you know, frankly, I was really proud of him. I knew it was hard.

And yes, I would honor his wishes to not make this film all about him being gay in any kind of salacious way. But when Paul chose to go back into the closet after the disillusion of this relationship, he did so because he wanted to focus on his career. That was something he could control. Those are his words. And I saw, particularly as a gay person, that Paul kind of compartmentalized into two people, and that the closet is—in some ways—a metaphor for that. But Paul, in his devotion to work, went on to develop Pee-wee Herman and continued to structure his life in this way where he was his alter ego publicly, and he was himself privately.

**Jesse Thorn:** You know, I knew he was gay, but also knew that he had never been out about it. And I had heard in my life many stories from gay men of his generation, and there are very distinctive ways in which his relationship with his queerness affected his life and art. I think that both he and his sister take pains to talk about how much his parents, including his macho dad whose macho always affected their relationship, were supportive of him. There's a moment in which AIDS touches his life when he goes to visit his first love, and his first love dies hours later of AIDS related complications. And that's after the two of them have broken up so that Paul can focus on his career.

And like these are these distinct traumas that came with being a gay man of his generation. And they're very unusually expressed in his life. And it seems like he really wanted to be clear about the ways in which his relationship to his queerness was not a Hollywood story, was not the 1993 version of what being gay in his generation was.

**Matt Wolf:** Yeah. I mean, I don't think Paul wanted to fit into boxes and categories in general. He was really squirrely about that. I just—his relationship to identity did not fit into conventional categories, because he was somebody who had committed his life to an alter ego. You know? It's like his relationship to self was different than yours or mine. I don't think it's an issue of being gay or being in the closet, you know; of being Jewish—as he was. I think his relationship to identity is different than ours or than most people's. Also, his experience of celebrity is different than others. But yes. I mean, Paul—like many artists and creative people in Hollywood or outside of Hollywood in Los Angeles through the 1980s and early 1990s—was impacted by AIDS, but also the culture wars and rise of the conservatism of that era.

But Paul was kind of doing his own thing in his own universe that he created. I don't think it's easy to draw parallels between anybody's experience and his, because he designed such an unusual form of identity and was, in a lot of ways, a world builder living on his own terms.

**Jesse Thorn:** I don't want to skip over the art. So, you're of the age where *Pee-wee's Playhouse* changed your life. What was special about *Pee-wee's Playhouse*?

**Matt Wolf:** I mean, it sort of depicted a world in which radical acceptance thrives, where you can marry a bowl of fruit salad, where creativity is the primary value system at play, where difference is something to be celebrated, and where art making is the norm.

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**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Clip:**

**Pee-wee:** Hi! While the cartoon was playing, I took an ordinary potato like this and stuck some pencils in it! And I made an animal that looks like this! (*Delighted chortling.*) I was being creative! I used my imagination! You can do this at home too!

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Matt Wolf:** I mean, it's just the world that I wanted to be in. And in a lot of ways, I don't even remember the specifics, but I remember identifying strongly with that world. And most of us who were fans had that pull-string doll, this ubiquitous doll that was so popular amongst fans of our generation. And it hung from a hook above my bed for years. And then in a high school photography class, I took a picture of it. And that picture hung on my refrigerator, and it still does. You know, we were talking about identity; my identity felt connected to that show and to that world. Not in really specific ways, but almost intuitively.



**Jesse Thorn:** One of the things that I love most about Pee-wee is what an impetuous jerk he is. And I just—it makes me so happy when (*chuckling*) he acts like a jerky baby! And that is something that was so unvarnished on *Pee-wee's Playhouse*, for a thing for children with intentions to make them people, that there's also room for being mad, grumpy, and selfish.

**Matt Wolf:** An adult baby. (*Chuckles.*)

**Jesse Thorn:** Yeah. Yeah! And that felt like real Paul Reubens thing. Not that he was always grumpy, mad, or selfish, but that he couldn't have made this art without asserting himself in presumptuous, rude, bratty ways in some contexts.

**Matt Wolf:** Yeah. I mean, I relate to it a little differently than just being an adult baby or being tempestuous or difficult. I think of these characteristics both as rebellious, but kind of punk rock. You know, particularly as I dived into the history of the character of Pee-wee, Pee-wee always felt like a punk icon to me—you know, probably before I even knew what that was. But he's sort of like a little punk. Not just a brat, not just a rebel, but a punk. I think other people have seen that in him. And then when we learn the history of how the character came to be, there's quite a literal connection to that scene.

**Jesse Thorn:** I wanna talk briefly about Paul's arrests, because I'm sure they're on people's minds—especially folks who don't know the full story. He was first arrested after the end of *Pee-wee's Playhouse* in Florida, where he was from—he was staying with his family—in an adult movie theater. You highlight in the film what I think was the most powerful aspect of that arrest, which was the image of Paul as Paul in the worst possible context. How did you bring that up with him?

**Matt Wolf:** Well, it's interesting. I never had the opportunity to deeply interview Paul about that arrest and to walk step-by-step through what happened and how it impacted him. But it's something Paul would bring up regularly, and we did discuss it through the course of our interview. I say that I didn't have the opportunity to, because—as I'm sure we'll discuss—our production kind of stopped and was put on the ice for a while. And I was scheduled to do a final interview with Paul the week after he died in which I was gonna discuss his arrests. But luckily, he had discussed them to a certain extent.

But yeah, I mean, the thing that I remember most about Paul discussing his arrests is describing the sense of shock he felt; and he really defined shock as a distinct emotional response different than trauma, different than sadness. But he said he was in a state of shock for years. It gave me a perspective. Just like loneliness is different than depression, I think shock is sort of a little different than trauma as we think of it—albeit, with a connection to that. I think it took him a long time to overcome the experience of shock that he felt from just the ruthless backlash that he experienced at that time and the injustice of it all.

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I think that Paul understood that his arrest was a footnote to his career. People would tell him, “It's not. It's not what I think about when I think about you,” but people refer to his arrest when they refer to him. It's there. And that, on just a basic level, was something he wanted to overcome in the documentary. But that was, like I said, the easy part. You know, his arrest

was so unfair and a real early symptom of our culture's desire to take down beloved figures. You know, our media kind of fascination with the lurid. You know, it's—Paul was an unfortunate casualty from that early on.

**Jesse Thorn:** I watched your movie with my daughter, who's 13. And I was kind of pausing it every once in a while to talk to her about something. And that portion of the film about his first arrest reminded me of something I hadn't thought about in a while, which was my mother's reaction. My mother and I used to watch *Pee-wee's Playhouse* together, and I was—nine? Or something like that when he got arrested. And it was in the news everywhere. I remember my mom saying to me he was an adult, and that was something adults did sometimes, and it was total bull(*censor beep*) that he was being targeted. And I was feeling this rush of immense gratitude to my mom for taking that position and being so clear with me about it when I was confused. But I also knew that like the way that that character disappeared from the public was still terrifying and upsetting and confusing to me as a kid.

You're a year younger than I am, and I wonder how you experienced it.

**Matt Wolf:** I have no memory of it. I never related to Paul through the prism of his arrest, and I never—my memory of Pee-wee was not impacted by his arrest. It just wasn't really on my radar. I may have been aware of it, but I have no recollection of it. And I think there's probably other people like that too. But Paul, I think, really felt that many people saw him and thought of that—which many people do. But people like me didn't. So, I didn't really have a strong recollection of feeling there was some sort of injustice surrounding Paul, but I knew that that was a part of his story. It was a part of his story that people wanted to know about. It was a point of concern and sensitivity with Paul, but it never was something that particularly interested me. But I was dedicated to the project of vindicating Paul, because looking back, that situation and the consequences of it feels so unfair.

**Jesse Thorn:** We'll wrap up with Matt Wolf in just a minute. When Paul Reubens died in 2023, it came as a shock to pretty much everyone who knew him—including Matt, who was still working on his documentary. More about that on the other side of the break. It's *Bullseye* from [MaximumFun.org](https://www.maximumfun.org) and NPR.

**Promo:**

**Music:** Fantastical, medieval style synth.

**Griffin McElroy:** (*With a wise, aged affect.*) The wizards answer eight by eight.

The conclaves call to demonstrate—

Their arcane gift; their single spell.

They number 64—until!

A conflagration! 63.

And 62, they soon shall be,

As one by one, the wizards die,

‘Til one remains to reign on high!

*(The music picks up tempo.)*

*(Returning to his normal speaking voice.)* Join us for *TAZ Royale*, an Oops, All Wizards battle royale season of *The Adventure Zone*, every other Thursday on [MaximumFun.org](https://MaximumFun.org) or wherever you get your podcasts.

*(Music ends.)*

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

**Jesse Thorn:** It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. I'm talking with Matt Wolf. He's the director of the new documentary *Pee-wee as Himself*.

I didn't know that Paul was sick when he died. Very few people did. You and your colleagues didn't, right?

**Matt Wolf:** I had no idea. No. I found out that Paul died on Instagram like everybody else. I had a conversation with Paul about a week before he died, and I could tell something was wrong or off.

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We were planning to do an interview the week after he died, and we had a sort of meaningful conversation that felt heavy, but I had no reason to believe that he was facing mortality. And I was prepared to proceed with this interview, and I learned that he died. It was—talk about shock, the shock that Paul described. I was just—I'd never experienced anything like this, and it took me over an hour to actually read the Instagram posts and to learn that he had been privately battling cancer for six years, which was just astonishing to me. I had no idea. I had no idea.

And it put into context a lot of things that happened through the making of the film: the level of anxiety that Paul felt, some of the fear that I picked up on. There was other stuff going on that I was unaware of. And you know, the day after Paul died, I really went to work. I started reading the 1,500-page transcript of our 40-hour interview—day in, all night—just seeing things that felt meaningful in the context of his death that I didn't understand before. And I'll be honest, every day from that moment until the completion of the film, I woke up and I

thought, “You need to rise to the occasion. These circumstances are extraordinary, and your responsibility is enormous. Do not drop the ball.”

And in a lot of ways, I feel like Paul was preparing me for that responsibility. And I hope that I've risen to the occasion, because I've been given an enormous privilege to share somebody's personal story, which they had not shared before. And I feel very grateful for that opportunity.

**Jesse Thorn:** I can tell you this, Matt. I worked on this stupid radio show with Paul for two and a half years, or something like that, (*chuckles*) to make this hour-long radio show that I thought was gonna be a week of work. And I lost all this money and everything.

**Matt Wolf:** It was great. I listened to it. It was great.

**Jesse Thorn:** It was a total nightmare.

**Matt Wolf:** But I know what you did. I know what you went through.

**Jesse Thorn:** Yeah. And I had not found a way to express how Paul was in the world—in my narrow experience—or the like pain and sadness I had around it, or just my immense gratitude that I had gotten to have that experience. And I saw in your film the Paul that I had seen in working with him—in all of the complexity—and felt the gratitude that you had for him and his work. And it really meant a lot to me. So, thank you for that, Matt.

**Matt Wolf:** Thanks. I'm glad it resonates with you as somebody who collaborated with Paul, be it briefly. It's intense. It's intense to work with Paul. It's intense to be in his orbit. It's inspiring, and it also can be combative. And you know, he was complex, and that's what made him insanely compelling. And I'll never forget the times I've spent with him, even when I was angry or upset, or when I was laughing so hard that I lost my voice. Or you know, eating pizza in a car that we bought with petty cash. (*Laughs.*) These memories come rushing back to me.

I went through something really intense over the course of years, and I'm still processing that experience. But it was an enormous privilege and a huge responsibility, and I have a lot of gratitude. And I feel proud—not just of the film I made, but of what we accomplished together, Paul and I. He was brave. He put himself out there in a way that he didn't necessarily know how to, and he did an amazing job at it. And I'm proud of him for what he accomplished in his life and for his commitment to sharing that with people. 'Cause I think it'll mean stuff to people who grew up shaped and informed by the incredible artwork that he put out into the world.

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**Jesse Thorn:** My daughter loved a part of the movie where you asked Paul, if—I don't remember—if he wanted to be making this movie with you, or if he liked you or trusted you, said, “Well, I liked one of your documentaries out of six.”

And my daughter said I should ask you which one he liked. *(Chuckles.)*

**Matt Wolf:** I think he liked two of my films, but he forgot. No, you know, I had a film come out right before I met Paul called *Spaceship Earth*, and he didn't like that film. And he told the Safdies and Emma, "I don't—this is not the right director."

And Josh Safdie, to his credit, said, "Watch Matt's first film, *Wild Combination*, about the musician Arthur Russell—like, another kind of unconventional, visionary artist who died of AIDS prematurely in the early '90s and experienced this critical revival. And Paul watched that film and was definitely moved by it and really taken by Arthur and his music. And that moved the needle. You know, I think he took our conversations more seriously after seeing that film. So, that was the one that I know got me through the door.

**Jesse Thorn:** *(Chuckles.)* My daughter then said to me, "Will it make the cut?"

And I said, "I don't know! I don't do the edit, sweetheart."

She said, "Well, slip the editor a 20."

*(They laugh.)*

**Matt Wolf:** Yeah. People are like, "Ooh, ouch!" when he says that. It's like I don't care. You know? Like, he's testing me, it's fine. You know? I don't care. You know?

**Jesse Thorn:** It was great! It was great, you know? That was ama—what a line! It was hilarious!

*(Matt agrees.)*

It was hilarious.

Well, Matt, I couldn't be more grateful for your film and the opportunity that it gave me to spend a little more time with Paul and also to share him with my child and talk to her about her experiences as a queer person in the world and our shared experiences with Pee-wee. So, thank you very much, Matt.

**Matt Wolf:** Thank you for watching it so closely. I appreciate it.

**Jesse Thorn:** Matt Wolf, folks. This documentary, *Pee-wee as Himself*, is an absolute must-watch. You can stream it right now on HBO Max. As I said at the top of this conversation, it captures the absolute magical brilliance of Paul Reubens—and his charm and kindness and decency and the *(chuckling)* immense frustrations of working with him. I'll tell you; I cried a number of times.

Also, we didn't really get into it in the interview, but Wolf's debut film—*Wild Combination: A Portrait of Arthur Russell*—is a really incredible look into one of the interesting and underappreciated musicians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. You can catch that on Kanopy and Hoopla.

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

**Jesse Thorn:** That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye* is created in 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. Right now, here at my home in Northeast LA and at our office in Los Angeles's Westlake District, we are thinking of and loving our neighbors, all our neighbors.

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 Hannah Moroz. Our video producer 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](https://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. Special thanks this week to Jacob Derwin at Technica House in New York City for recording our interview with Ego Nwodim this week, along with Neil Roush and the team at NPR New York for recording our conversation with Matt Wolf.

You can follow *Bullseye* on Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, where you'll find video from just about all our interviews—including the ones that you heard this week. If you heard something you enjoyed, why not skip over to YouTube and hit that share button? Send it to a friend who might like it.

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://MaximumFun.org) and is distributed by NPR.

*(Music fades out.)*