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

Promo: *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of MaximumFun.org 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. It used to be, every summer you'd get maybe two or three of them: big, over-the-top spoofs. The kind where you get a joke every minute. Wordplay, and silly visual gags, and—you know—fart jokes and stuff. And pretty much all of those movies would be hits. I mean, not like Marvel tentpole hits, but tens of millions of dollars. Big blockbusters, where the emotional climax is a kiss scene that gets interrupted by—I don't know—like, a cameo from John McEnroe or whatever.

These days, there aren't a lot of those. And when you do see them, it's just on streaming. You know? You watch it once; it's nice enough. Enter 2025's *The Naked Gun*, starring Liam Neeson and Pamela Anderson, directed by my guest, Akiva Schaffer. It's a reboot of the series of films starring the late Leslie Nielsen, all of which are classics. In this *Naked Gun*, Liam Neeson Stars as Frank Drebin Jr., the son of Leslie Nielsen's character. He is a dumb cop, a violent cop, an often charming cop who works for the LAPD. His partners are all dumb, violent, often charming cops. The villains he encounters are all dumb, violent, and often charming villains.

Naked Gun, like its predecessors, is a very dumb movie in the best way possible. A straightforward spoof comedy that—if there's any justice in this dumb-dumb world—will herald the return of the summer comedy blockbuster. And there's probably nobody better to direct and write a movie like *The Naked Gun* than Akiva Schaffer. Schaffer has a resume full of brilliant, dumb, joke-a-minute work. He directed the 2020 *Chip 'n Dale: Rescue Rangers* movie, which was way better than it needed to be! As well as *Pop Star: Never Stop Never Stoppin'*, which is one of the funniest movies of the last couple decades.

With Andy Sandberg and Jorma Taccone, he is a member of the comedy trio, The Lonely Island, the group responsible for the classic SNL song sketches “I'm on a Boat”, “Lazy Sunday”, and, uh—we're gonna check in with standards and practices; we might have to bleep this—“(Censor beep) in a Box”.

Anyway, I'm so excited to talk with Akiva. Let's get right into it.

Transition: Bright, chiming synth with a syncopated beat.

Jesse Thorn: Akiva, thank you so much for joining me on *Bullseye*. It's really great to get to talk to you on the show. Such an admirer of your work.

Akiva Schaffer: Well, like I just said off-air, I'm honored to be on here.

Jesse Thorn: (*Laughs.*) The honor's all mine. Were you worried to take on the project of *The Naked Gun*?

Akiva Schaffer: Well, yes, of course. 'Cause, like yourself, I love it. And the last thing you want to do is in any way ruin people's childhoods or ruin the legacy of something beloved, especially when you beloved it yourself. The first *Naked Gun*, obviously I've been talking about it a lot this week as I do things like this, and it really is kind of a perfect movie for one of these spoof movies. It's so disciplined; it just stays in its genre the whole time, except for when it breaks it on purpose. And it's—the way I keep describing it is like a magic trick of a movie. It sets up all these kind of rules. And as I was trying to figure out what/how/why it worked, and then it just breaks the rules in the very next scene. And it breaks them the way you want them to be broken. Yeah. I was scared.

Jesse Thorn: The thing of it is those guys, Zucker-Abrahams-Zucker, they made a few of the funniest movies ever made in that in that genre. Well, I mean the funniest in any genre, but they are in that genre—that sort of spoof genre—where anything can be a joke.

(*Akiva confirms.*)

And many other movies have been made that emulate them, and almost all of them stink. Like, are not very funny. (*Laughs.*)

Akiva Schaffer: Certainly, the ones that led to the genre's demise in the last—I don't know—20 years ago? And then that decade. Those ones certainly left a bad taste in everyone's mouth. I don't want to name them.

Jesse Thorn: No, no, I'm not asking you to name them. I'm just—

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Akiva Schaffer: (*Playfully.*) You want me to name all the worst spoof movies that killed the genre?!

Jesse Thorn: No, I would—could you just talk about the people that you don't like because they killed the—?

(*They laugh.*)

Akiva Schaffer: Yeah, exactly. I mean, it was not taken lightly. I've said that— So, when they actually came to me, Paramount and the people from Fuzzy Door—that's Seth McFarland's company—and said, “Would you be interested in doing a new *Naked Gun*?”, my first, instinct was, “Of course not.” Because like the rule of remakes or reboots or even sequels is you want to choose something that has a lot of room for improvement, something that could be better, where you see something and you go, “Yeah, but it's missed this or that, and I could do better!” And you can't do better than the first *Naked Gun* movie. You can just do different and just do your best at doing something new and different. And it was the Liam

Neeson involvement that made me change my mind. And it's what made me see like, "Oh, I could do that movie."

You know, the original's '88, and they're doing 1950s TV like *M Squad* and *Dragnet* and they're doing *Dirty Harry* and Charles Bronson. And there's been 30 years of amazing stuff in the detective/spy/noir genres—whether it's *Jack Reacher* or *John Wick* or Liam Neeson's movies like *Taken*.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Clip:

Bryan (*Taken*): If you are looking for ransom, I can tell you I don't have money. But what I do have are a very particular set of skills. Skills I have acquired over a very long career. Skills that make me a nightmare for people like you.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Akiva Schaffer: There's sooo much stuff that we can spoof. So, when it became Liam, I went—I could kinda see how him sending up his action man persona that he's been doing for 10 years and doing the comic version of it could be great, and how there's all this fertile—whatever you wanna call it—kind of untapped jokes that would not be ripping off the first movie, but honoring its spirit and the style of it, but trying to update it.

Jesse Thorn: I wanna emphasize as I ask you these questions how much I loved your movie and how successful it was.

Akiva Schaffer: Thank you very much.

Jesse Thorn: But as you describe those opportunities that making this movie now gives you—and making this movie with Liam Neeson gives you—one of the things that occurs to me is that the kind of television show and movie that was spoofed in the original *Naked Gun* movies has a profoundly stiff, robotic quality that the *Taken* movies or more—Like, they just don't make anything as square as they did in 1960. You know what I mean? And a big part of the joke of those original *Naked Gun* movies is just how profoundly square.

Akiva Schaffer: Yes. They were not—they didn't have 1% of self-awareness. They were easier targets, because also there was like four channels of TV, so everyone had seen everything. So, the monoculture gave everybody the same points of reference. And you're right, there's a stiffness to them that was begging to be made fun of. Some of the things that kind of made it through to this one from that is like the no cursing. There's no cursing in those old TV shows, so there's no cursing in *Naked Gun*, 'cause they're spoofing them, and

they want it to feel like it. And then as a challenge to ourselves, there's also no cursing in this movie, 'cause I just thought it was an interesting challenge to make a comedy right now with no cursing.

Jesse Thorn: One of the things that's special about those Zucker-Abrahams-Zucker movies that you don't see in film comedy of the last 25 years or so, is the sheer volume of visual humor. When you got that script, how many—? I mean, like living rent-free in my head the last 15 years has been a bit from *Police Squad* where someone enters the back of a frame in a crime scene with one end of a stretcher, and then as they back across the length of the frame, the stretcher turns out to be—it fills the entire frame, and turns out to be what looks like, you know, 30 feet long.

Akiva Schaffer: It's a very—*(chuckles)* it's a stretchy stretcher.

Well, I didn't—First off, I didn't get the script. It was a rare of call where the studio was like, “We want to make this,” and where you have the movie star being like, “I'm willing to do it.” And then, from my perspective, there really was no script.

And so—but that's a rare opportunity to be like, “Ooh, I'm the director.” So, all the pieces of the puzzle are here except for the actual thing we would make. And so, I called Dan Gregor and Doug Mand, who I'd worked on the *Chip 'n Dale: Rescue Rangers* movie with. And I was like, “Are you guys free? 'Cause I think it's a rare opportunity, but we'd have to move fast.” And we would just go to my office from ten to six every day.

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And we're very, very motivated and diligent. Like, just—I don't know. That's how you get a movie made in my opinion, is like just—if the studio shows any interest, just overwhelm them with momentum.

Jesse Thorn: We've got so much more to get into with Akiva Schaffer in just a minute. Akiva co-directed one of my favorite comedies ever, *Pop Star: Never Stop Never Stoppin'*. It is one of my favorite comedies ever! But it was not a smash hit. We'll talk about why after the break. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

Transition: Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

Jesse Thorn: It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. I'm talking with Akiva Schaffer. He's the director of the new movie, *The Naked Gun*.

When you have Liam Neeson attached to the film from the beginning, you have a guy who has this one legacy as this immensely capable action star of the last—I guess it's probably almost 20 years now. He's also one of our greatest actors. Which, you know, Leslie Nielsen was a competent actor for sure, but he was no Liam Neeson in his serious work.

Akiva Schaffer: That is funny. When I did hang out with David Zucker, he was like, “Why Liam? He's like an Academy Award winner. We always chose B-list actors.” And for the

people that don't know the ZAZ stuff that was like part of what—in my mind, at least, hadn't been done before, even though someone might correct me—is this idea of doing a spoof of a dramatic movie with all dramatic actors. Also, dramatic lighting, dramatic everything—from the camera work to the wardrobe—where if you like walked in when a joke wasn't being told, you would think you were watching the dramatic version, and then laying the jokes on top of that so they're so surprising all the time.

And also, the actors aren't telling jokes. They're not being funny. They're being real and just doing their best. Almost as if the actors themselves are so dumb, they don't realize what they're saying is funny. They're just there to perform the scenes.

Jesse Thorn: Yeah. In *The Naked Gun* movies particularly, I think, as they go along, Leslie Nielsen gets a little goofier, and Frank Drebin gets a little goofier as a character. Like, there's some goofing around.

Akiva Schaffer: You mean like in the sequels?

Jesse Thorn: Yeah. But like it's clear that he is there and was, you know, cast in *Airplane!* originally, specifically because he was a boring square in everything else and just was such a—

Akiva Schaffer: In everybody's mind, so it could be so surprising when you realize he's that funny. I'm not saying he's a boring square. That seems derogatory. He was a—

Jesse Thorn: Onscreen! Onscreen. As a man, I understand he didn't go anywhere without his fart machine.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Clip:

Leslie Neilson: The thing is that we know that we're being funny, but you can't let the audience know for one second that you're trying to be funny. Not for one second. Although, I will do almost anything I can for a laugh. (*Sudden fart noise.*)

(*Audience laughter.*)

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Jesse Thorn: And apparently, it's not like a modern one. It was like a little metal box with like a rubber band thing that he became, you know, the Yo-Yo Ma of playing.

Jesse Thorn: (*Laughs.*) What about Pamela Anderson? How did you end up with Pamela Anderson in the film?

Akiva Schaffer: I mean, I was so lucky that she was even interested. I probably saw her name on some list of people who were around and was like, “Oh my god!” And I just love the idea, because it feels like she could have been in the originals or, at some point in the ‘90s, in a Zucker spoof. She actually—I didn’t realize it at the time—but was in a cameo in one of the *Scary Movies*. So, I liked that she felt like she was of that time, but she’s also having this amazing second act to her career. And I was aware of it, even though I knew she had just shot the Gia Coppola movie. It wasn’t out yet, but it had been shot. And I knew she had a documentary on Netflix, even though I hadn’t seen it. And I just knew she was—there was more there.

So, I was excited to get on a Zoom. And she was super funny and playful on the Zoom and clearly wanted to do it and would take it very seriously, but also understood the assignment of it. And she has that little twinkle in her eye that Priscilla Presley had, which is so rare. To kind of what you’ve been saying, like you could have the best actors in the world, and they could be terrible in a *Naked Gun* style movie. ‘Cause they could be telegraphing the jokes. And Pam has that thing that—again—Priscilla Presley had where she can say things, misunderstand things, or say these style of jokes in a way that—at least, for me—seems like she really means it.

Like, so she doesn’t have to play stiff. She can have a big smile on her face, and you still don’t think she’s smiling ‘cause the joke is funny. You think she’s smiling ‘cause she’s clueless.

Jesse Thorn: Yeah. She has a real lightness to her performance in the movie that’s really great, and very different from that like “how stiff can someone be?” joke. You know what I mean?

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Akiva Schaffer: Well, yeah, because people think playing it straight sometimes means being serious. But the truth is, you have to play it real. Like, you’re really—you know, in the fun scenes, you’re having fun. And in the scary scenes, you’re scared. And then you have to just play the story and really act it. But somehow the audience, again, just has to think that you’re so dumb, you don’t understand what you’re saying. (*Chuckles.*)

Jesse Thorn: Were you worried that you would not get the chance to make straight comedy in the future, in your career, for theaters?

Akiva Schaffer: Oh, just ‘cause they’re so out of fashion right now? I wouldn’t say I was worried. There’s (*chuckling*) no need to be worried about it. But—

Jesse Thorn: I was worried about it! I was worried about it, and I’m not a filmmaker!

Akiva Schaffer: I mean, as a fan of it, I miss the days where every couple years you could count on Ferrell and Adam McKay to give us another *Talladega Knights* or *Stepbrothers* or

Anchorman or *Other Guys*. And you knew you were gonna get that quality and their sensibility, where they were doing what they think is funny. And I definitely miss that.

Jesse Thorn: *Barb and Star* was five years ago, now, Akiva! Like—

Akiva Schaffer: Yeah, time's moving real weird too.

(Jesse agrees with a chuckle.)

That's just a problem we're all having. Or maybe it's our age, but it—that's crazy. But yes, there was always people, like Wiig, trying *Barb and Star*. Again, it went straight to streaming, but maybe that was 'cause of the pandemic. I'm not sure.

Transition:

Clip:

Music: Relaxed, playful background music.

Speaker (*Barb and Star*): Before we begin, I just wanna thank Barb and Star for hosting tonight's talking club and for making their famous, usual hotdog soup. Again! *(Laughs tightly.)*

Star: You're welcome. It's a simple recipe.

Barb: Simple.

Speaker: Oh, Gail's not here, but it's six o'clock on the dot. So, it's time to lock the door. *(Clears throat.)*

(Sound of a lock immediately followed by frantic knocking.)

Gail: I'm here!

Speaker: You're late, Gail! Bye-bye!

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Akiva Schaffer: But there's always people trying it in the fringes. But yes. There was a little golden period there of where you knew there'd be big, funny, theatrical, studio-pushed, real

comedy movies. And I mean, I'm sure there's a lot of think pieces that can be written. I'm no expert of why they went away.

Jesse Thorn: I mean, I worried when your film, *Pop Star*, wasn't a box office success, which is about a decade ago. I went to see that movie with my comedy partner. And I mean, tears on our faces laughing.

Akiva Schaffer: Thank you.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Clip:

Speaker (*Pop Star: Never Stop Never Stoppin'*): You know what I'm saying? You did something a little different.

Conner: The catchphrase verse, as it's now known.

Speaker: Oh, yeah, yeah, hello!

Connor: I had been working on a catchphrase. But what had happened was I just thought of so many dope ones that I was like, "What if I put 'em all into the verse?"

Music: "Turn Up the Beef" from the movie *Pop Star: Never Stop Never Stoppin'* by The Lonely Island.

Turn up the beef!

It's Conner, (censor beep)

Say word! D-D-D-D-D-D-D-D-Dilbert! Doink-de-doink!

Sorry, Dad!

Dinky nuts! Squirrel jam!

HATS!

(Song ends.)

Speaker: Yeah. He said so many words I didn't know. That was a game changing moment!

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Jesse Thorn: That movie, *Pop Star*, ate it with a lot of critics.

(Akiva confirms.)

Not all, but a lot of critics.

Akiva Schaffer: No, no, it did okay on the critic—it's in the 80s on Rotten Tomatoes. I will defend that.

(Jesse affirms.)

For that kind of a movie, that's very high for it. So, I was proud of the fact that it did okay critically. Especially—

Jesse Thorn: I hope you were proud of the fact that it was really, really good. Because it was reeeeally funny. *(Chuckles.)*

Akiva Schaffer: Well, thank you very much. But it was like two months out, and we went, “This isn't gonna make money.” It was not a question to me the way that, right now, while we're recording this a week before *Naked Gun* comes out, I go, “Well, this could go either way!” *Pop Star*, if you talked to me a week before—I don't think I would've said it in an interview, but we were like having fun out there promoting, but we were like, “I don't—” We could just feel it wasn't connecting. Like, there's always—the blame is always thrown around when the movie turns out good, and yet the audience that now has found it—like yourself—doesn't know it's for them.

There is some disconnect where marketing for movies is trying to get sooo many people to go see it when it's a big studio movie that sometimes they miss everybody. Because the slightly more niche audience that would've loved it could see the ads and go, “Eh, that's probably not for me.” ‘Cause they have to try to get everybody. So, sometimes they end up with nobody. Whereas, like I remember after it came out, even some of the people at Focus were like, “We really wanted them to move it over to us.” ‘Cause the truth is, if it had been put out more like the way you put out *A Mighty Wind* or one of those Christopher Guest movies, where it's a few theaters, and then word of mouth starts spreading—like, where they platform it? Maybe it would've found the audience.

‘Cause it was marketed kind of like it was a Bieber spoof. And we have like two Bieber jokes in the whole movie, and one Bieber outfit. Among hundreds of references to hundreds of artists. And I think that also made people be like, “That seems very narrow and lame to spoof Bieber, specifically.” Like, we like Bieber. You know? And so, we didn't like that it was Bieber-centric either.

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'Cause we like Bieber.

Jesse Thorn: You made a TV special slash—I don't know, a short movie called *The Bash Brothers* with the other Lonely Island guys.

(Avika chuckles and confirms.)

And in some ways, to me, that felt like a response to the reception that *Pop Star* had received—in that it was perhaps an even pure expression of the sensibilities you developed over your career.

Akiva Schaffer: Well, it certainly— Surprise-dropping on Netflix certainly protected our feelings, in terms of we couldn't—

(Jesse laughs.)

Certainly, you don't worry about the box office on that. So, it can be a more artistic expression. For people that don't know this one, it's called *The Unauthorized Bash Brothers Experience*, and it is sarcastically very lofty and artsy.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Clip:

Music: “Let’s Bash” from *The Unauthorized Bash Brothers Experience* by The Lonely Island.

I dodge your fist, beat your blood-red Red Sox soggy

Astrophysicist, make you see stars promptly

I’m more hopped up than a Brewer that’s hyper

Sit Indian-style when I’m Yankee on my Tiger

I’m staring at a Philly with some major league twins

If you didn’t know by now, I’m naming baseball teams

Let's bash (let's bash)

(Music cuts out.)

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Avika Schaffer: That one just— Honestly, that just came from me being bored. And Andy was on *Brooklyn Nine Nine*, and Jorma was in New York. And I'd be at our office where we have a recording studio, and I was trying—almost like the way real artists sometimes get bored of their own persona and create a Sasha Fierce to their Beyonce. And I was like, “What is our version of that?” Where we choose subject and deep dive it, that kind of frees us of our own stuff. And we basically made that album with no intention to put it out, just no clue why we were doing it. We made a bunch of songs where I was Mark McGwire, and he was Jose Canseco.

We grew up in the Bay Area, I should say, in this era. So, these were our heroes. And then I eventually showed it to Robbie Praw, who's an exec at Netflix who does all the standup specials and sketch stuff. And he loved the A's and was just like, “What are you—why did you make these songs?”

(Jesse laughs.)

And our budget was... teeny, I don't wanna say the number, but it was less than it takes for one episode of *I Think You Should Leave*, the other show I do for them. It was very little, and it was just a labor of love.

Jesse Thorn: *(Laughs.)* It really meant—and means—a lot to me. It's—

Akiva Schaffer: Well, again, thank you so much.

Jesse Thorn: It's very rare that like something is released in the media landscape and my inbox and text messages immediately fill. But I think The Lonely Island made something about the Bash Brothers—

Akiva Schaffer: That's in your Venn diagram of friends *(unclear)*.

Jesse Thorn: Yeah. Well, I probably had to get like extra Gmail storage to deal with the emails that I got.

(They laugh.)

At what point in your life did you feel like you were dedicating your life to this nonsense?

Akiva Schaffer: It was always my favorite stuff as a kid and through high school. Like, my group of friends, it would be—you know, what made us laugh is the main thing we'd be talking about, whether it was *The Simpsons* from Sunday night or some random thing we found. And a lot of my favorite memories are like the first time I saw *Austin Powers* in the theater; the first time I saw *Space Balls* with my dad. I don't know. For certain people, certain things just like become part of their personality when you're looking for who you are when you're growing up.

And so, part of what me, Andy, and Jorma sometimes talked about—especially early in our career—was like, “Oooh! What if this could be like that for some other 11-year-old boys out there?” Like, somewhere, that's always the audience. I think for everybody, your audience is kind of yourself now or yourself when you were younger. Right? Just with anything you're doing. Yeah, this was always just a big part. It was always music, what we were going to eat for lunch, and what was funny. And that's kind of—basically, the same things I think about now.

Jesse Thorn: How old were the three of you when you started making things together?

Akiva Schaffer: We met in junior high. We met when we were 11 years old? 12 years old? And really became better friends in high school with a bigger group of guy friends, like eight friends. But we weren't really making anything in high school. We really started making stuff—I would have—I went to US Santa Cruz, and I would do short films, and I would have an Jorma come up from UCLA and be in them. He was a theater major at UCLA.

And then Andy was at Santa Cruz, but we didn't really work at together. Then he went to NYU for film school. And when we all graduated, we kind of like—Andy showed me his films, student films. I showed him mine. Jorma was there, 'cause he's also was in mine. And the three of us were the three of the friend group that were like, “Let's move to LA and try to make it in the biz!”

Jesse Thorn: I'm impressed that you were making short films in college, because you are of the last generation where getting access to equipment to make something on video was really hard.

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I mean, I was a senior in high school when you were a senior at Santa Cruz. And when I was at Santa Cruz, three and four years later—

Akiva Schaffer: I didn't know you went there! I didn't know I was talking to a fellow sluuug!

Jesse Thorn: I graduated. Four years of university. I have a bachelor's degree. When I—

Akiva Schaffer: (*Playfully.*) That's not what your producer told me! But go ahead.

Jesse Thorn: (*Laughs.*) Okay. When I was in college, even a few years after you'd graduated from college, people that I knew that were film majors didn't get to touch a camera until their senior year.

Akiva Schaffer: I didn't even—I was a computer science major my first two years, which I'd probably be sooo rich now if I just stuck with that. Because I graduated in 2001. That's a grrreat time to have been on the ground floor of knowing how to code.

So, I only was there in a film major for my second two years. And I think I mainly— But you're not wrong; there was only a couple production classes. I did get into one my junior year and got to make one thing, and then another thing my senior year. But I only had three total short film projects, and it was competitive to get into those classes. You are not wrong. And it was hard to get even time on a computer to edit.

Jesse Thorn: When I was in college, all the sound at the radio station was being played off of carts. Like, you know, tape cartridges. We were—I think by the time I was a sophomore, we were cutting on computer and running it off to a cart so that we could play it in the studio. And that was just audio and, again, a few years later.

Akiva Schaffer: Is that the Santa Cruz radio station?

Jesse Thorn: Yeah.

Akiva Schaffer: I went up there a bunch of times.

Jesse Thorn: This show started on that station! This is our 25th year.

Akiva Schaffer: That's pretty cool!

Jesse Thorn: You were also part of the sort of first generation of comedy creators to make their own stuff and put it on the internet. You know, obviously there were people writing things for the internet, but in terms of video. Channel 101 was one of the big outlets for that. The three of you made an *OC* parody called *The Boo*.

Transition: A whooshing noise.

Clip:

Speaker (*The Boo*): You want my advice, Mr. Banks? I suggest you not show your face in Malibu again. Well, what do you kids call it? The Boo? (*Chuckles.*) I like it.

Transition: A whooshing noise.

Jesse Thorn: What gave you the temerity to think that you could shoot video, put it on the internet, and people would watch?

Akiva Schaffer: I don't think we thought people would watch. And they rarely did. Yeah, we moved to LA. We knew we liked making short videos ourselves. A friend of ours had the money to buy one of those mini-DVD cameras and lived only a few blocks away and would let us borrow whenever we wanted. And we bought out the cheapest boom mic we could find for like 150 bucks. And that's all we really needed. And then a computer. That's where we really had to spend our money. But it was the very beginning of what anyone can do on their phone now. We all got like temp jobs, 'cause we had no connections. So, we couldn't even get like PA jobs on real sets. We would apply at temp agencies and end up working for like three days at a law firm like stuffing envelopes or whatever.

And we just—we kinda had this idea that we wanted to make a demo reel on VHS that we would—and then very quickly it became on DVDs; it was right when DVDs became burnable. And we would use it to try to get agents. That was our first step of our plan. You know, just to remind people, it was very expensive to have video on the internet back then. There was no YouTube. The idea that somebody would put your video on a server and house it there and allow it to play would be—you'd have to rent server space. It would be very expensive.

Jesse Thorn: I was terrified to post real audio files on the internet, because I was worried it would break me financially.

(They chuckle.)

Akiva Schaffer: Exactly. Exactly. It's like when you used to have to pay for texts when phones were new. But my brother worked for a website that was very popular. But it was just a—you know, like a pirate—not a pirate website, but like a, uh—just one person owned it. It was not a company. And so, that dude was like, “Oh, well, I'll put it on my server. I have tons of room.”

So, we were one of the first people that was able to be like, “Oh, we'll make our own domain name, and we can put our own videos on there.” And that was so rare that, for instance, when Andy and Jorma got jobs as PAs on the Charlie Sheen era *Spin City* sitcom and would be the ones getting the writers' lunch—like, running around town like gofers. And at one point, they got the guts to show a few writers one of the shorts we had made. And that writer wanted to send it to UTA. And we were like, “Oh, it's right there. It's a link.” And UTA—United Talent Agency—is one of the big talent agencies in LA and still is, were like, “We can't play that.” That's how early it was.

[00:30:00]

(Laughs.) Like, the computers at the talent agency—one of the big three in all of LA—could not play streaming video. So, we had to make VHSs to give it to the agents.

Jesse Thorn: I remember trying to talk radio stations into downloading and playing audio files of this show, because I just couldn't spend all my time burning a new CD every week to mail to them in Walla Walla, Washington and Hattiesburg, Mississippi—these places that were carrying my show for free. *(Laughs.)*

Akiva Schaffer: Yeah. Yeah. And they said no. They were like, “Send us a DVD.” Or CD, rather.

Jesse Thorn: Yeah, they were like, “Burn a CD for us, and then maybe we'll do it. Yeah.”

Akiva Schaffer: And FedEx it. *(Chuckles.)*

Jesse Thorn: Yeah, exactly.

Akiva Schaffer: Yeah. It was a different time. This is like 2002/2003.

Jesse Thorn: What made you think it was working?

Akiva Schaffer: I mean, it really helps having three of you so you can turn to each other and be like, “I think what we made is good!”

“Me too!”

“Alright. Well!”

If you were alone, I don't know how you'd keep your energy up. But we very quickly—even at Santa Cruz, I got positive reinforcement right away. Like, I would make my student films, and for the most part—next to everybody else's—it felt like they were doing it the way you get through a class—any other class that you're not like passionate about. Like, “Okay, that's the assignment. I did the assignment. I'll pass the class.”

And I was doing it like, “Who cares about the class? I can't believe I'm getting to make something.”

And I was good at editing because I had done two years of computer science. And so, the fact that it was non-linear computer was—it was literally Final Cut Pro one. The first one had just come out. And I immediately knew how to—I just knew how to edit right away, and I would watch everybody else really struggle. Not to be mean. And so, immediately I felt like, “Oh! Hm! I might be pretty good at this.” And so, I had a little bit of—probably some amount of confidence that was probably—honestly, at that age, at 20?—it was probably more confident than I even should have been.

Jesse Thorn: We'll wrap up with Akiva Schaffer after a quick break. Keep it locked. 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 a syncopated beat.

Jesse Thorn: This is *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. I'm here with Akiva Schaffer. He's a founding member of the comedy group The Lonely Island. He's also the director of *The Naked Gun*.

Hip-hop has always been at the center—or at least a significant chunk—of what the Lonely Island has done.

Akiva Schaffer: Certainly for our music stuff. Yeah.

Jesse Thorn: There were some good versions of comedy about hip-hop or in the form of hip-hop when you guys got into that business, but there weren't a ton. And there were a lot of examples of comedy hip-hop where the joke was, "Isn't hip-hop funny, because rapping isn't singing?", basically.

(They chuckle.)

Akiva Schaffer: We grew up in the Bay Area, in the East Bay, which is— And we grew up in Berkeley specifically, which is neighbors with Oakland. And like, they're different, but they're very similar. You know. It's one of those things where you don't exactly—the line is blurred, and then not blurred as you get deeper into Berkeley. *(Chuckles.)* But for a good portion of neighborhoods, it's very blurred. And the culture growing up there was all rap and R&B. And a little reggae. And of course, grunge was also coming up at the same time with clubs like The Gilman, and Green Day's from there. But the—oh, we went to the public schools, and they're huge, you know, 3,000-people high schools, very multicultural. And the overall culture was definitely hip-hop culture.

So, we grew up just absorbing it at all times, loving it at all times, and also being very aware that we were not exactly part of it. That we were fans of it, but at an arm's length. And we were very respectful of that. Because, you know, at that point Tupac and Digital Underground and E-40, it was a real moment for Bay Area rap. Hieroglyphic's crew with Souls of Mischief. The Coup, which is, you know, Boots Riley's group. There was so much going on in it, so there was a lot to love locally, and there was a lot to do and be excited about. But also, it's Berkeley, which definitely lets you know—all the politics of it all is also

very much in your face. So, to your point, comedy rap generally sucks, and we were pretty embarrassed to do any of it.

[00:35:00]

Because we were like, “Boy, we're ratting more to a genre that we don't like.” But we kept having ideas we liked, and so we'd goof around with them a little, 'cause we also love it so much. And we'd also go way out of our way all the time to be like, “We're not real rappers! We are fake rappers! We are fans of rap. We are not making fun of rap. We are just putting jokes to music the way you would any musical that is funny. This is in no way—the joke is not (*mockingly*) ‘What if we rapped?!’” Of course, there'd always be people—when you make something as popular as “I'm on a Boat”—that probably are reading into it the wrong way. Especially 'cause we're three white guys.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Clip:

Music: “I’m On a Boat” by The Lonely Island.

I’m riding on a dolphin, doing flips and—

The dolphin’s splashing, getting everybody all wet

But this ain’t Sea World; this is real as it gets

I’m on a boat, (censor beep) don’t you ever forget!

I’m on a boat, and

It’s going fast, and

I got a nautical-themed Pashmina Afghan

(Music cuts out.)

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Akiva Schaffer: I challenged them to not think that it would just be—the song would be just as funny if we were three Black guys. We really tried to always be really cognizant of that. But it's—for us, like a lot of satire is taking what's popular and finding what's silly about it. And for us, that's what's popular—or what was popular. And so, it also was where to put some of the satire. And it's also ripe for it, because it's so serious a lot of the time. There's a lot of rap that's very funny, that's borderline comedy rap. I mean, there's a lot of great rappers that have great punchlines. So, it is not across the board.

But there's a lot—there's something about being macho and braggadocio that is ingrained in rap of like, “I'm the best!” that is inherently so jock and masculine (*chuckling*) that it is very funny. You know, showing off about having boats and stuff is inherently kind of funny.

Jesse Thorn: Do you think that growing up in the East Bay and the culture of independent creating that lives in the Bay Area—and I think its epicenter is in the East Bay—was essential to what The Lonely Island became? Do you think you had the chutzpah to make your own stuff and put it on the internet in part because the culture surrounding you when you were a teenager was Casual from Hieroglyphics hanging out outside Rasputin Records, selling copies of his CD or whatever?

Akiva Schaffer: That's a very good, interesting question! And of course as a Santa Cruz graduate—I don't even—Jesse, where are you from?

Jesse Thorn: I'm from San Francisco.

Akiva Schaffer: Oh. I guess I should have known that at the beginning of the fricking interview.

Jesse Thorn: The handsome and historic Mission District of San Francisco.

Akiva Schaffer: Yeah, I was like, “This example is getting very specific.” Number one, I never saw Casual outside of Rasputin's. I would've been so starstruck. I loooved *Fear Itself*. That was his debut solo record; it was so good.

But anyways, no and yes, you know what I mean? The Bay area, like—yeah. Doing, you know, '70s culture and making your own zines and self-publishing at Cody's Books. And to do it—you know, Too Short and Hieroglyphics selling their mix tapes out of their trunks. I don't know. That's definitely part of the culture, but that didn't feel like showbiz on TV and movies and theaters.

Jesse Thorn: You don't have to be selling mix tapes outside of a record store to have the understanding that it is okay to make things yourself, that you don't have to wait to be given permission to make things. Which seems self-evident maybe to people creating culture in 2025, where anybody is making something and putting it on social media. But 25 years ago, even hip-hop culture in most of the United States was still about, “Can I get signed?” You know? And hip-hop was probably the most independent part of popular culture, you know?

Akiva Schaffer: I've never thought about it before, but absolutely. The punk rock, anti-establishment ethos in the Bay is—very much tells you, yes, that you could just go off and do it yourself. But I will say, movies and TV are so larger than life, and no one we knew had anything to do with any of it. When I watched that *Light and Magic*— Did you watch that documentary on Disney+? It's about ILM, you know?

Jesse Thorn: No.

Akiva Schaffer: And ILM was always in Marin, you know, with Lucas' effects. And they were doing—like, I had no clue that Phil Tippett's studio was just in the flats of Berkeley right near where my family would eat Mexican food and that they were doing like AT-ATs animation right there. It would've blown my mind! I would've gone and waited outside, like I did at KCSU to see the records. I would've just sat outside the warehouse. I just—we were—it's hard to express how far I felt from any real entertainment culture, beyond hip-hop stuff that we could see.

[00:40:00]

The idea that someone could even get on the news in terms of being on my TV was like—would've been the most exciting thing. Like, I knew one kid who had been one Rice Krispies commercial, and it was—I thought about it for 10 years. Like, that dude was on a Rice Krispies commercial!

(Jesse laughs.)

I thought it was so cool. I've told this before, but they shot a scene from *Made in America*, and I heard about it the day after that they had been shooting on Telegraph Ave. And I was like so upset that I didn't go. *(Laughs.)* My buddy, Matt, has shown me pictures of him as a kid—another Bay Area guy—with Will Smith, with Ted Danson. Like, somehow he got the message like, “They're down on Telegraph!” I'm still jealous about it.

I wanted—I would watch MTV when I was at friend's houses; we didn't have cable. And there was something about MTV where I would just—if I was allowed to watch it 20 hours a day, I just would. Where I just wanted to be in that world and part of it so bad, and I think that is what it took—at least back then—to motivate to go do some of this stuff.

Jesse Thorn: It's funny, I think often of—you know, your Lonely Island mate Jorma's father, is still I think the creative director of Berkeley Rep in Berkeley. He may be retired by now. But—

Akiva Schaffer: He moved down to LA, so I'm not sure if he still is. But he was for—I'll make it up, but let's say 40 years.

Jesse Thorn: Yeah. *(Laughs.)* And you know, I went to quite a few shows by a sketch comedy group called Culture Clash there. And one of the guys from Culture Clash worked down the street from my house, at Mission Graphics in San Francisco. And one of the guys

went to graduate school at San Francisco State with my mom in the Latin American Studies Department. (*Chuckles.*) And they had a one season sketch show on Fox.

And when Culture Clash were on television, I couldn't believe it was real. Like, the idea that someone that— Like, my mom was a single mom, so sometimes I had to sit in her grad school classes. But like the idea that someone I had seen in a 40-seat theater on the campus of San Francisco State had a show on Fox, a pre-*House of Buggin'* show on Fox, was unfathomable to me!

Akiva Schaffer: Agreed. There was one girl at our school that I didn't know, but because Fantasy Studios was in the Bay, her dad had an Oscar for having mixed on the *Godfather*. And I would just hear legend of it. (*Laughs.*) Like, that's how little there was. There was just like a legend that, "You know, her dad has a thing!" But it's not like I knew her or her dad. It was just— That's kind of what I mean by—so, in some ways the Bay might have gave us a punk rock, do-it-yourself mandate. But it also just felt just as far as being from Kansas, so to speak. Yeah, I didn't feel any connection to anything.

I did know that *Miss Doubtfire* had shot at the Claremont Pool. So.

(*Jesse laughs.*)

I wonder if kids today really have— It's gotta be so different. Like, anybody at any moment can broadcast live. That's insane that everyone has the capabilities of NBC only more, 'cause it's worldwide and into anyone's pocket. Any kid could take their phone and hit Instagram Live and just start talking right now, and they are doing something that before—what?—10 years ago, you would've needed one of the biggest companies in the world to do, and it would only be in the country you are in. Just it is mind boggling. So, I wonder— It's definitely different.

Jesse Thorn: Do you feel like a showbusiness insider now?

Akiva Schaffer: I don't think— I don't know that that really exists. So, that's why everybody you ever talk to is like, "I'm not one of them!" Because I don't— If it does exist, maybe it exists on the corporate side. Because those things are—there's structure to them where you can be like, "I'm inside of it. Everyone knows who I am." So, I feel like that's how people feel inside. I don't know that any creators ever feel inside, 'cause you're not inside that world. You're always still part of the fight to get something made or whatever.

Jesse Thorn: Do you think that fight is ever gonna leave you?

Akiva Schaffer: No, and I'm always doing the— Like, *Naked Gun* is IP. It's paramount. It's the least punk rock thing you can think of. But still, to me it was punk rock, because of the creative side of that these are dead movies that haven't existed for many, many, many years on this level. And the fact that I knew there'd be a certain amount of people that write it off right away and are like, "You can't redo *Naked Gun*!" and get angry.

[00:45:00]

That doesn't excite me. I wish they'd give it a shot and be open-minded. But I knew in that way that it was dangerous. And I knew the—oh, forgive me—bullseye to make it successful was very, very, very teeny. So, in those ways, I kind of relished the challenge of it. And so, there was just a lot to excite me that didn't make it feel like sold-out corporate IP. You know, it didn't feel—what's the word?—cynical.

Jesse Thorn: Akiva, I'm so grateful for your time and so happy I got to talk to you about all this great work.

Akiva Schaffer: Dude, this has been a delight. And I'm so happy to meet a fellow Bay Area guy who knows about Rasputin's.

Transition: Bright, chiming synth.

Jesse Thorn: Akiva Schaffer. *The Naked Gun* is out now in theaters. Yes, it is as good as you'd hope it would be. Possibly better. Oh man. It is such a hoot, and I know that maybe it flew a little bit under the radar, but if you haven't watched that Lonely Island Bash Brothers special, I don't care if you know anything or care anything about the late 1980s Oakland athletics. It is so funny. At the very least, look up the Maya Rudolph and HAIM's parody of—I guess, Prince, or more accurately, maybe like Vanity 6—that is called “IHOP Parking Lot”. Oh man, it is so funny.

Transition: Playful, upbeat synth.

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. Here at our office, we have a coin-operated rocket ship. Like, the kind that would be outside a grocery store. And lately, all of our guests have just been climbing into it, including Al Jardine from the Beach Boys, who was in his 80s. It's great. The thing works, if you're wondering. If you ever come by, we'll plug it in for you.

Our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producers, Jesus Ambrosio and Richard Robey. Our production fellow at Maximum Fun, Hannah Moroz. Our video producer is Daniel Speer. We get booking help on *Bullseye* from Mara Davis. Our music comes from our pal Dan Wally, also known as DJW. He's on Bandcamp. [DJWsounds.bandcamp.com](https://djwsounds.bandcamp.com). You can download music from *Bullseye* there. Pay what you want. Our theme music was written and recorded by The Go! Team. It's called “Huddle Formation”. Great song from a great band. Thanks to them; thanks to their label, Memphis Industries.

You can follow *Bullseye* on Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, where you'll find video from just about all of our interviews, including the ones you heard this week. Please go do that. If you liked an interview on *Bullseye*, go grab it on YouTube, and send it to a friend.

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 and is distributed by NPR.

(Music fades out.)