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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](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. Making it in the world of punk rock has changed a lot these days. I mean like what it takes to be a success. 25 years ago—before SoundCloud and Bandcamp and TikTok, and most of social media—you and some of your buddies from school would start a band. You would practice; you'd maybe record some songs on a four-track at home, possibly put them on Myspace or something; play some parties, some local shows. Eventually you'd get in a van and tour to anywhere that would have you. A house in Dallas, an art gallery in Baltimore, a dive bar in Fort Wayne, a lot of like community centers and unitarian churches. You'd sleep on couches, on floors, in cheap hotel rooms, wherever they would have you.

Then you'd get home, and you'd record some more songs, and you'd play some more shows. Maybe you would like sell burned CDs or cassette tapes at your shows. Then you'd tour again. And again, and again. Until your band got picked up by a label or you got sick of the whole thing and gave up and decided to finally finish your teaching credential.

My next guests might be one of the last punk bands to make it the old-fashioned way. Joining me are Stefan Babcock and Steve Sladkowski. They're the singer and guitarist for the band PUP.

**Music:** “Concrete” from the album *Who Will Look After the Dogs?* by the band PUP.

*Picked you up*

*You sat in the backseat, picking your nose clean*

*We were only 18*

*You watched me spill my guts all over the concrete*

*(Music fades out.)*

**Jesse Thorn:** PUP got together in Toronto about 15 years ago. The band's name is an acronym, standing for Pathetic Use of Potential. That was what Stefan's grandma fed about the band. Anyway, PUP recorded and toured and recorded and toured, and it paid off. These days, PUP is a beloved band. They've performed on the Warp Tour and Lollapalooza, at Redding. They recently opened for Sum 41 on that band's final tour. Here's a single from PUP's new album *Who Will Look After the Dogs?*. This is “Olive Garden”.

**Music:** “Olive Garden” from the album *Who Will Look After the Dogs?* by the band PUP.

*Let's meet at the Olive Garden*

*It's been too long*

*Last time, your grandma was in a coffin*

*It was weird to talk*

*I'm still waiting here, ever since you've gone*

*And after all these years, you still turn me on*

*Ahh, ahh...*

*(Music fades out.)*

**Jesse Thorn:** Steve, Stefan, welcome to *Bullseye*. It's great to have you here on the show.

*(They thank him.)*

I feel like the last five-ish years of your band has been about the question “What does it mean to be a real grown adult in a punk rock band?” Is that—?

*(They agree with a laugh.)*

Is that an issue that you've wrestled with?

**Stefan Babcock:** Yeah! Well, as you can tell, we're grown adults in a punk rock band. So, uh, it is a strange thing. You know, one thing I always thought about as we got older was that there's a lot of punk bands who made great music and got older and tried to make music about still being young.

**Steve Sladkowski:** It's grim. It's pretty grim. *(Laughs.)*

**Stefan Babcock:** Yeah, it's a bit too bleak for me. I just kind of like—I always wanted to hear these bands that I loved when they were young make records about what it's like to—I mean, we're not old, but like some of them are old. And it's like, yeah, make a record about what it's like to be like 65 and still playing punk for younger people and what that feels like. To me, that's interesting. So, when I'm 65, that's what we're doing.

**Jesse Thorn:** How does it feel different for you right now, in your 30s?

**Steve Sladkowski:** I guess it, your body doesn't recover the way—

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You know, we used to be able to do no days off and sleep on strange kitchen floors and drink or not drink or—you know, whatever—and be fine. And now, if like my pillow is too soft?

*(Stefan and Jesse laugh.)*

I'm just like, “Oh, no!” But you know, I think Nesterrr—who plays base in the band and has two kids—and you know, we have partners and pets and all that sort of stuff. And it's harder to go away for weeks and months at a time! But that is kind of the— We're lucky. I think we have supportive partners who understand that is kind of the reality of being in a band in 2025.

**Music:** “Hallways” from the album *Who Will Look After the Dogs?* by the band PUP.

*It took me a while to let it sink in*

*The way that you never say what you're really thinking*

*It took me a while to find out I keep fighting the feeling*

*And once again, I've been lucid dreaming*

*Turn the TV on, but the thoughts won't stop*

*So, I'll rip out the cord, but I just can't turn 'em off*

*The first night without you*

*I collapsed on the living room floor...*

*(Music fades out.)*

**Jesse Thorn:** I had this experience. We were talking about baseball before we started talking on mic. And I had this experience of—I had been trying to explain a baseball player named Joey Votto to my comedy partner with whom I tour. And I read this interview with Joey Votto where he described all the things that he brings with him on a road trip. Because you know, ball players are in a town for a few days at a time. And it was so considered and specific. And I thought, “This is what it is to be a”—maybe he was 39 at the time—“to be a guy who travels for a living at age 39 and then has to get the most out of himself every single day,” is he has this kind of clock, this kind of pillow. Like, every single, specific choice was made with consideration so that when it was seven o'clock and he ran in between the lines, he could be the best version of himself.

And I really admired it, frankly. *(Laughs.)* Like, I'm not a fussy guy in that way, but I was like, “This is great! I wish I could perform at my peak level.” *(Laughs.)*

**Steve Sladkowski:** I feel like we're all pretty streamlined in that regard. Like, I have a—I just got to a point where I was like, “I just want the same shirt, the same white t-shirt every day. And then I just don't have to think about that.” And like, this is my—this is the little towel that I bring. I don't know. I feel like you have—

**Stefan Babcock:** *(Teasingly.)* Woah, you're a towel boy?! I didn't know that.

**Steve Sladkowski:** I've got a packed towel. I have it with me. I don't need it, but it's one of those things that I have with me.

**Stefan Babcock:** Just to be clear.

**Jesse Thorn:** Wait, you have it with you right now?!

**Steve Sladkowski:** *(Laughing.)* No, no, no.

**Stefan Babcock:** Just to be clear, I don't need the towel.

**Steve Sladkowski:** Yeah. Yeah. It's just like—I guess my point is like that—*(laughing.)*

**Jesse Thorn:** We enjoy each other's company.

**Steve Sladkowski:** Yeah. That I have like—I understand that, of these are the things that I bring on tour, because they are—they make it easier to feel like I can go out on stage or whatever, in a way that kind of puts the focus and the energy on performing for people. You know? Yeah. Do you have any of those things?

**Stefan Babcock:** I mean, I think for me it's less of like a bodily comfort thing. It's more of a—I don't know if “existential” is the word I would use, but it's more of a like a—you've kind of made this pact with yourself and with your friends that you're gonna spend all the years of your life that most people use to build a career that will last them 'til they're in their mid-60s or whatever, you're gonna use all of those years to do this thing that usually doesn't last. You don't think about touring 150 days a year in your mid-30s when you start a punk band when you're 22. You know? It's just not something that factors into the equation.

**Jesse Thorn:** What's it like when you're 22?

**Stefan Babcock:** It's just like... dumb?

*(They laugh.)*

**Steve Sladkowski:** Yeah, I think I described it to someone the other day. Like, there's like a healthy level of delusion you need to have. I think we had to have some level of like, “This is crazy, but we don't do it, we might regret it.” And I feel like when you play music with people, and you enjoy it, it's so rare to find yourself in a situation where the other people in the band—

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—the four of us have like a kind of that mindset of like, “Yeah, let's actually try and do this.” So, I think we recognized how special that was and how lucky we were to be in that situation to like allow us to kind of be this like 11-seat Chevy van full of delusion.

*(They laugh.)*

**Stefan Babcock:** That's kind of a weird way to put it. That's interesting.

**Steve Sladkowski:** Well, I think like— You know, 'cause you have to—the amount of sacrifice and, like you were saying, just kind of how and—it's quite a needle to thread, I guess is the thing. And most people do not ever get the opportunity to thread that needle. And we have been able to thread it many times, which is wild.

**Jesse Thorn:** We have so much more to get into with Steve and Stefan from the band PUP. Mosh pits are still a thing at punk shows, including the ones in which PUP performs. We'll talk about how they've changed over the years. It's *Bullseye* for [MaximumFun.org](https://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 Stefan Babcock and Steve Sladkowski. They're the singer and guitarist, respectively, in the punk rock band PUP. PUP released a new album this past May; it's called, *Who Will Look After the Dogs?* I talked with Steve and Stefan in the MaxFun Studios here in Los Angeles. If you don't believe me, too bad! I can prove it with video.

That's right. We're posting videos of all of our interviews on the *Bullseye* YouTube page, as well as on Instagram and TikTok. Go ahead and search for *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn*, then smash those like and subscribe buttons. Folks, I'm gonna be the next Mr. Beast. The Mr. Beast of in-depth arts and culture interviews.

Let's get back into our conversation with the band PUP.

You started your careers time when the kind of music that you were making—both punk rock and, you know, whatever you wanna call it—indie or college rock or alternative rock or whatever—the two sort of lanes where your music might be able to fit in were essentially disappearing from commercial viability.

*(They laugh and agree.)*

Like, you were like, “Great, the last time a punk band was on MTV was two years ago. Let's get in the tour bus!”

*(Steve agrees.)*

**Stefan Babcock:** Yes, that's true. But. You know, I always think about this, because it's so easy to think like, you know, if we had just been a band— You know, we have friends who were in relatively mid-level rock bands, you know, eight years before us and became millionaires, because they sold records and stuff. Like, it's so easy to fall into that trap of, “Oh, only we had done this at this time.” And I think like you just gotta look on the— You gotta find the positives. Like, for instance—I might be speaking out of turn here, but from what I can see, we were maybe the last generation of bands who was like, “Well, like social media is social media, but we're just gonna get in the van and tour until people pay attention to us.”

I don't think that really happens that much anymore. At least not in our community. It's more, well, put out songs, put out videos, see what you can get. And then once people care, go on tour. We were like—you know, the first two/three years we were on tour, we were playing to five people every night, and it didn't bother us. And we were one of the—I think, the last group of bands who could—touring was still financially feasible. Like, you could still go out and like make money, but maybe you wouldn't bankrupt yourself.

**Steve Sladkowski:** You could fill the gas tank to get to the next show. Yeah.

**Jesse Thorn:** I was gonna say, how do you eat when you're selling 20 tickets, and there's four guys?

**Steve Sladkowski:** Thriftily? *(Laughs.)*

**Stefan Babcock:** Well, we had a tour in the UK—our first tour—that we called the Hunger Strike Tour.

*(Steve chuckles.)*

Essentially, like we were paying ourselves five pounds a day, and we made a deal with every venue and house show that we played that they would have to feed us or else we weren't gonna play. And so, we would take our five pounds—hopefully from the merch sales the night before; often not—and we would get this thing called, uh, Nourishment. Which is like a supplement.

**Steve Sladkowski:** It's like a meal replacement.

*(Stefan confirms.)*

Like, a milkshake.

**Jesse Thorn:** Like an Ensure, or a—

*(Stefan confirms.)*

**Steve Sladkowski:** Yeah, but they were—they come in like cans. You know? Like, which is not—yeah.

**Stefan Babcock:** Every morning. Every morning, it was just coffee and Ensure, and then get in the van, and hopefully not be grumpy enough to break up the band by the time you got to the venue. And then the venue would feed us, and away we go. It was fun.

**Music:** “If This Tour Doesn’t Kill You, I Will” from the album *The Dream is Over* by the band PUP.

*If this tour doesn't kill you, then I will*

*I hate your guts, and it makes me ill*

[00:15:00]

*Seeing your face every morning*

*One more month and 22 days*

*If this tour doesn't kill you, I may*

*Counting down the miles 'til we leave the state*

*I'm counting down the minutes 'til I can erase*

*Every memory of you*

*For a second, let's be honest*

*Nothing will clean your filthy conscience*

*Everything you do makes me wanna vomit*

*And if this tour doesn't kill you, buddy, I'm on it*

*(Music fades out.)*

**Jesse Thorn:** When you go to a show, do you throw your body around still?

**Stefan Babcock:** Yeah. Oh, wait. When we're attending as fans?

**Jesse Thorn:** When you attend.

**Steve Sladkowski:** Oh. Oh. I think if it's like a rowdy show, I think I'm like very comfortable being Pit Dad now.

**Jesse Thorn:** What is Pit Dad's job?

**Steve Sladkowski:** Which is sort of like you stand on the outside of the mosh pit kind of—and you have an arm like this, so that—

**Jesse Thorn:** Up, so the forearm is—like, a forearm shiver position.

**Steve Sladkowski:** You just kind of keep it— Yeah, you can kind of keep it so that if anyone kind of falls back, they're not taking out unsuspecting crowd members. You can help pick someone up. But like, I— *(Sighs.)* Man. We were in Europe like a month ago, and my knee just was hurting. You know?



*(Jesse affirms and Stefan chuckles.)*

So, I'm like, "Okay, I can just have knee issue, I feel like the mosh pit is not for me. I'll just—I'll hang back, make sure that nobody gets hurt, including myself." But yeah, I don't need to be that deep in it anymore.

**Stefan Babcock:** You sound much older than you are.

*(They laugh.)*

**Steve Sladkowski:** Look, I don't know what happened with my knee! It's gone now, but it just was—*(laughs)*. Yeah.

**Jesse Thorn:** What about you, Stefan?

**Stefan Babcock:** I love a balcony. I love a balcony, you know?

**Jesse Thorn:** Just hang out in the wings?

*(Stefan agrees.)*

You've graduated to "I have a backstage pass"?

**Stefan Babcock:** Well, like I think I'm in the 0.01 percentile of people who have crowd surfed the most in the world. So. I've done my time, and I still do my time.

**Steve Sladkowski:** Yeah, you still do it. You're still out there.

**Stefan Babcock:** I still get in there most nights. Like, when we're on tour, I'm still in the pit somehow. When we're not on tour, I'm just like— You know, I'm usually gonna rowdy shows to like watch my friends play. And I'm like—yeah. I just wanna be in the wings or on the balcony and watch my pals.

**Jesse Thorn:** Is the pit different for your shows now than it was 10 years ago?

*(Stefan "um"s thoughtfully.)*

**Steve Sladkowski:** Oh, I think so. Yeah, I think so. I think we—when it started, it was a lot of smelly punk dudes. Now it's a lot of all kinds of smelly punks. And that's been, I think, a really cool thing for us, is like—

**Stefan Babcock:** Safer. More inclusive.

**Steve Sladkowski:** Yeah. That— You know, that was something that we prioritized, not as like a badge of honor, but just because that was sort of the world of like all-ages shows in

Toronto growing up, was kind of— Like, it's almost taken for granted. Like, you don't realize that wasn't the case for everyone. Like, we had all ages venues where it was kind of more diverse than some of the places that we were playing initially in this band. So, to be able to have—you know, try and build like lineups that didn't just feature White dudes or whatever, like that was just something that to us felt like a pretty natural extension of how we got into punk rock in the first place. So, it's been nice see that almost take on a life of its own with the people who come to the shows.

**Stefan Babcock:** Yeah. Our shows are full of freaks, which is really rewarding.

**Steve Sladkowski:** Yeah. It rocks!

*(They laugh.)*

**Stefan Babcock:** Like, it's really—yeah. Like, you know? I don't— Nothing against it, but I just don't wanna—you know, I don't see us being the normie band, you know? It is really nice that like— Yeah, like Steve was saying. It's like the pit at a PUP show is usually like—there's the lifelong punks, and then there's also like 14-year-old kids with weird hair going to their first show ever and everything in between.

And it's like, the greatest thing about that is that it just feels normal and natural. Like, it feels like everyone's just like there for the same reason and care about looking after each other and care about like—care about the environment maybe more than the band. Which like sounds weird, but it's like that's really important. Because when I started going to shows—like, a small guy. I was a small kid. And like, I was just getting ruthlessly crushed at hardcore shows. Not that we're a hardcore band.

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But like, you know, I remember like loving bands and loving live music and also like feeling scared to go. And I feel like at PUP shows, it's like if you're nervous, somebody's probably gonna help you. And if you're one of the people who want to go really hard, there's gonna be a spot for you in the venue to do that as well. So, yeah. It all feels like— I feel really—we all feel really lucky get to do that and feel like really—like we've created—we've been a part of a positive experience for other people.

**Jesse Thorn:** What did punk rock mean to you as a kid? How did you get into the scene in the Toronto area where you're from?

**Steve Sladkowski:** Well, 9/11 and Iraq. Like, honestly. *(Stammering.)* I was in grade nine. I think I had just seen Blink-182. Bad Religion opened for them. That was the first kind of place that it felt like someone was saying no to, you know, whatever I was seeing on the news. And that was like right around the time that I met like Zack and Nestor and was like playing guitar, you know? I think I'd been playing the guitar for like a year or two. So. And then my dad had some Clash records, you know.

**Jesse Thorn:** What about for you, Stefan?

**Stefan Babcock:** Steve was kind of talking about it before. Like, the really strong all ages community in Toronto. I actually, strangely—like, I had been to a few shows, but I started going to shows because I was like playing in bands. Which is like a really exciting, unique experience—I think—that I didn't realize didn't exist everywhere else 'til we started touring. Whereas like was a bunch of all-ages venues in Toronto. And the promoters—the people who were putting on shows, they were booking like touring bands, and they were always like trying to— You know, if you were a 14-year-old kid going to those shows, those promoters were trying to be like, “Hey, can you guys start a band? 'Cause we need people to open these shows.”

Like, you know, there are all-ages shows every single night in Toronto. And so, I just got like— I learned to play guitar, because my friend wanted me to play in his band. And I learned guitar in a month poorly and played in his band poorly. And then I just started being at those shows and going to shows and supporting other bands. And it's like a really wonderful way to kind of come up in music, I think. Really community oriented.

**Music:** “Totally Fine” from the album *THE UNRAVELING OF PUP THE BAND* by the band PUP.

*Hiding out in the back of the parking lot*

*A thousand choice that I probably should've called off*

*Fixate on every little thing*

*I don't eat, I don't sleep, I don't do anything*

*Lately, I've started to feel like I'm slowly dying*

*And if I'm being real, I don't even mind*

*Whether I'm at my worst or I'm totally fine*

*(Music fades out.)*

**Jesse Thorn:** I'm one of the least punk rock guys I know. But—

*(They laugh.)*

But I did go to arts high school with a lot of kids who were really serious about punk rock. And I got the impression from them that, as much as they loved the music—which they did—it was about community. Much more than that.

**Stefan Babcock:** Yeah. Yeah, for sure. I think like all those people are just like looking for some sense of belonging, you know? And to feel like you're part of something, and to make friends with other people who are trying to do something. You know, it was like... not to say we weren't smoking weed, but like we were focused on something that in some sense was productive. Like, we were all trying to play music and learn about music and figure out being in bands and figure out writing songs and stuff like that. And you know, a lot of my other friends who weren't doing that were just kind of... maybe regret that, you know? They were involved in other stuff.

**Steve Sladkowski:** And I think the fact that we got to sort of almost help create a new community for ourselves by doing that kind of touring and getting in the van, and you know—oh, meeting like Jeff, right? Like, Jeff Rosenstock, one of our dear friends who's also an amazing musician and principled punk. Like, meeting him for the first time on a tour and being like, “How do we not like really know each other?!” And just all these people that we connected with, you do kind of—as much as it's a local thing and, you know, community is at home—there is sort of like a—I'm not trying to be like, “Make global local” or whatever. *(Chuckling.)* You know, like some sort of like—like, a Whole Foods slogan. But like, you know, to meet those people all over—

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—and to know that there are friends in the UK whose floor that we slept on that, anytime they need something in Canada—wherever, you know—that just like is so special. That to me is like—those are lifelong friends. Those are lifelong people whose views on the world have helped shape ours and hopefully vice versa. And I think that's like really a special kind of community too.

**Jesse Thorn:** You mentioned the idea of being a principled punk.

**Steve Sladkowski:** I'm tryin'!

**Jesse Thorn:** Outside of singing with a hint of contempt in your voice—

*(They laugh.)*

What are the principles of punk rock that mean the most to you?

**Steve Sladkowski:** I think there's a strong undercurrent of social justice, of like queer and trans liberation, of standing up for what you believe is right and trying to make room for voices and viewpoints that nuance or even contradict that. And you know, allowing yourself to... not be so steadfast in your beliefs that they can't be changed if you feel like something convinces you. Right? If someone's perspective that you hadn't considered before convinces you that, “Hey, look at the world differently. I can think about things differently than I would

five years ago when I hadn't been exposed to this perspective.” And also playing on loud (*censor beep*) guitars.

(*They laugh.*)

**Stefan Babcock:** Well said. Yeah.

**Jesse Thorn:** I think when you make punk rock, emotional tumult can sometimes come out on record as a sort of self-destructiveness. And there are, you know, self-destructive records in your catalog. How do you feel about those themes as a 30-something, relative to how you felt about them as a 24-year-old or whatever?

**Stefan Babcock:** Yeah. It’s different. I mean, I love all of my children.

(*Steve cackles.*)

Like, (*chuckles*) I'm proud of the songs that we wrote when we were, you know, in our early and mid-20s. They are 100% not the songs that I would write now.

**Jesse Thorn:** What's a song that you wrote back then that you love that you wouldn't write now?

**Stefan Babcock:** Well, you know, we have the song “DVP”. Which is—you know, there's a pretty obvious streak of self-destructiveness through that song.

**Music:** “DVP” from the album *The Dream is Over* by PUP.

*Three beers, I'm so messed up*

*Get drunk, and I can't shut up*

*She says that I drink too much*

*She says I need to grow up!*

*I'm driving fast to get away...*

(*Music fades out.*)

**Stefan Babcock:** That song's done well for us, and I feel proud and excited and happy to play it every night. But you know, there's one thing about writing about drinking too much when you're 24, and then it stops becoming cute at a certain point by an age where you should know better—hopefully. Or not “should”; that's putting too much value on it. But you hope that you've moved past that to grapple with hopefully bigger issues. I don't feel in any way at all bad or ashamed about having written song when that felt like that was my life. Like, it comes from a very honest place. But you know, now I definitely have this feeling of like there being a little bit more of—now that some people care about this band—

You know, the other thing is like DVP was written when nobody cared about PUP. And there is a bit of responsibility I think that comes with this, especially when—like I was saying—you know, as much as there are people our age, there's like 14-year-olds at the show. It's like, think that it's a position that I never expected to be in, where some teenagers are listening to the things that we're saying. And with that, you just—it's just something to be aware of and conscious of. And I don't think I—like, I don't think I drink too much anymore. *(Laughs.)* I think I probably drink the appropriate amount for my brain.

*(They laugh.)*

So, yeah. That was a long, roundabout way of saying “DVP”, great song. Listen to it.

*(They laugh.)*

**Jesse Thorn:** We'll wrap up with Steve and Stefan from PUP. Stick Around. It's *Bullseye* from [MaximumFun.org](https://www.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 Steve Sledkowski and Stefan Babcock of the band PUP.

What's a song that you've written—say, for this new record—that you don't think you could have written ten years ago?

[00:30:00]

**Steve Sladkowski:** You know, I think— There's a song that closes the record, called “Shut Up”, that is sort of down-tempo. There's a lot of ethereal—like, your kind of voice and guitar are very, very exposed in the beginning. And there's like, I think, a level of trust when you bring a song that is that vulnerable that—I think a lot of the years, we almost would try and mask that vulnerability either through complication of like arrangement or like writing the actual music or just like playing it louder and faster. It's a different kind of comfort with each other to allow that vulnerability to actually be the kind of centerpiece of a piece of music or a song.

**Music:** “Shut Up” from the album *Who Will Look After the Dogs?* by the band PUP.

*Another day spent laying in*

*Same pants you were sleeping in*

*It’s dark, early in the negatives*

*I’ll keep the shut*

*I think I’m purposeless*

*Such an idiot, oblivious*

*You’re working through the evenings*

*I’m working through the fog*

*You’ve got your master’s thesis*

*I’ve got my stupid little songs*

*(Music continues under the dialogue.)*

**Steve Sladkowski:** I hear that growth; I hear the four of us listening to each other. You know, the end of the song has this sort of like noisy, kind of loud—it feels almost improvised. Which is not a thing that we do very much with the band, at all. And I hear us listening to each other in the studio when I listen to that. And again, that’s a different type of vulnerability and a different type of openness that I think we’re still—even 15 years into writing songs, 12 years into writing songs, however long it’s been—almost still scratching at the surface. Like, it’s exciting to me that there are things that feel like breakthroughs still.

*(An instrumental break in the song, then it fades out.)*

**Jesse Thorn:** You have a duet on this record, Stefan, with Jeff Rosenstock. Duets in this type of music are relatively unusual. And you know, they’re a little different from Barbra Streisand and Kris Kristofferson or whatever. It sounds like the two of you guys yelling at each other. The song is called “Get Dumber”.

**Music:** “Get Dumber” from the album *Who Will Look After the Dogs?* by the band PUP.

*You think I’m a drain (I can’t argue)*

*You’re kinda the same (it’s sorta part of your charm)*

*But when you really get on it*

*OHHH! LYRICS!*

*You finally call, it’s so arrogant*

*“You still playing those songs? It’s so embarrassing”*

*Nice of you to be sentimental*

*I say as I swallow the chemicals*

*I don’t wanna hear*

*Who you’re dragging under*

*It seems like, every year*

*I swear you’re getting dumber*

*(Music fades out.)*

**Jesse Thorn:** Is it literally the two of you yelling at each other?

**Stefan Babcock:** Yeah. Same room, facing each other. Mic on both of us, just facing each other, screaming into each other's faces. It’s great.

**Steve Sladkowski:** I have the video if you wanna see it.

*(They laugh.)*

**Stefan Babcock:** It's a really exciting way to record. It's like, please—like, you get 2/3rds of the way through, and it's like, “This is going great. Please, don't (*censor beep*) this up.”  
*(Chuckles.)*



**Jesse Thorn:** There's a part where somebody—I think Jeff Rosenstock—forgets the lyrics and just yells, “Lyrics”?

**Stefan Babcock:** Yeah. *(Chuckling.)* Yeah, yeah. Yeah, it was—you know, we thought about doing another take, but that’s kind of magic.

**Jesse Thorn:** Like, yells the word “lyrics”. *(Chuckles.)*

**Stefan Babcock:** “Aaah, lyrics.”

**Steve Sladkowski:** That's kind of the best part of when you're not a singer, and you're just in the control room, and something like that happens. You realize the like unbelievable amount of power you have. Just like John Congleton was sitting there. I’m like, “John? Leave it in. We’re keeping it.” *(Laughs.)* Like, “That's the take, man.”

**Stefan Babcock:** Yeah, everything else about the take was really good, and that was the best part about the take. So, you know. Yeah. I feel really lucky—yeah, to get to do that song with Jeff.

[00:35:00]

**Stefan Babcock:** I wrote that song in Jeff's house with all of his gear and recorded it on his computer. So, it just felt natural that he would be singing it.

**Jesse Thorn:** How does it feel to be generating that level of intensity as a singer while also receiving it from someone else?

**Stefan Babcock:** *(Laughs.)* I have never thought about that, and it's a wonderful question. You know what? I have to give Jeff credit where it's due. Because you know, most of this record, how we recorded it was like we recorded the instruments live off the floor; we'd punch up a thing here or there, fix a mistake if we had to; and then I would go in and sing on top of it. So, I figured when Jeff was there, I was like, “I'll sing my part. You sing your part. Great.”

He's like, “Nah, we're gonna sing this together. 'Cause I don't think I can catch a vibe off being in a room alone and having everyone look at me like that.”

And I was like, “Alright! Well, let's get in there together.”

Yeah, there is a sort of ineffable energy to that song because of that.

**Jesse Thorn:** Can I ask a practical question about being the vocalist in a punk rock band? How do you do it—when you're on tour, how do you do it every night?

**Stefan Babcock:** Sucks. *(Laughs.)*

**Jesse Thorn:** Because like, even if you're a— You know how they have these things about metal guys that have those beautiful wails, and then they turn 27, and then someone says, “You have to hire this vocal coach to teach you how to support your wails, so that you're not destroying your throat,” right? But like, yelling—like, full yelling, which is essential to your vocal style, is not a thing you can just support from your diaphragm and have it not be an issue.

**Stefan Babcock:** Yeah. It's really tough. I've gone—I've—*(sighs)* Steve can attest, I've really gone through it.

**Steve Sladkowski:** Yeah. I mean, once in Baltimore, Maryland, I thought there was no band anymore.

**Stefan Babcock:** Yeah. You kind of go through it. But you know, there's a lot of boring things that I can tell you about, which is like warming up and drinking obscene amounts of water, and also like kind of being the boring one on tour who just parties less and drinks less and is in bed first. And then there's the other stuff, which is maybe a bit less—I don't know if it's as practical, but it's coming to terms with the fact that there's no way to do this—like, to yell without it being harmful. And all you can do is your best to mitigate that. And also, like—you know, that's kind of something that I've felt in life in general as I've gotten older is like it's very rare that you're gonna be your very best self. And all you can do is be the best self that you can be in that moment. So, like I go out there, and I sing my best and yell my best every night. And sometimes my best is great, and sometimes my best is like, “That kind of sucked.”

But like the wonderful thing about being in kind of aggressive-ish punk band and also being in a band that has been, historically, so unbelievably self-deprecating, is that people don't seem to mind too much if I go out there and my voice is mangled. As long as I'm giving it my best, and as long as the four of us—like, we're having a good time? Which we almost always are on stage. As long as that intensity is there, like people don't expect us or even want us to be perfect. Some of our best shows have been like—on a technical level or on a performance level—disastrous. But we caught a feeling, and we shared something with the crowd, and that's what's special.

Like, I feel so much— When I think about singers, like can't even understand what it's like for Adele to go through her stuff, where every time she steps on stage, people have an expectation that her voice is gonna be beautiful, and she's gonna hit all the notes, and she's gonna sound awesome. It's like... we've set it up so that people do not have that expectation.

*(They laugh.)*

**Jesse Thorn:** Stefan, will you do your vocal warmups for us?

**Stefan Babcock:** *(Moving up and down the scale.)* Tina, Tina, Tina, Tina, Tina, Tina—it's 20 minutes of that.

*(Steve confirms.)*

**Jesse Thorn:** It's all Tina?

**Stefan Babcock:** No. Then you switch it, and you say, (*annunciating clearly*) “Naughty.” So. They call it my Naughty Tinas.

**Steve Sladkowski:** Yeah. Like, before we all realized that doing vocal warmups is a sensible thing even as a guitar player, would be like, “Oh, off he goes to do his Naughty Tina!” But yeah, I mean it's—yeah, basically that. (*Doing scales through a lip buzz.*) You know, that sort of stuff?

**Stefan Babcock:** You know, it's boring as hell, but I feel the need to say it now, is it's like that is like 50% about warming your voice up and 50% about getting into like—kinda what Steve was saying—clearing your brain, getting ready to— Like, you know! It's not exclusive to me in our band.

[00:40:00]

But I will just talk about my personal perspective is like, as somebody who deals with a bunch of mental health things. You don't get a choice. You're playing a show. And you can be in a great—you can feel manic, or you can feel like the worst version of yourself that you've ever felt, and you're still gonna out on that stage. And sometimes—like, you know, we just did this tour in January in hockey arenas in Canada. And it was like, one of those days was the worst emotional day of my life. Not for any particular reason, just mental health bad day. And it was like, “Well, at the end of this vocal warmup, I am gonna step out onto that stage in front of 20,000 people, regardless of how I'm feeling.”

And so, like—yeah, like 50% of that is like getting your voice working. The other 50% is like, “It doesn't matter. You're about to do this, so get your head straight,” you know?

**Jesse Thorn:** Well, Steve, Stefan, thank you so much for taking all this time to talk to me on *Bullseye*. It was really great to get to know you.

(*They thank him.*)

Stefan Babcock and Steve Sledkowski of PUP, everyone! Their new album is called *Who Will Look After the Dogs?* You can buy or stream it now. PUP is on tour. They have dates all over the world, including right here in the United States of America. Buy a ticket. Get in the pit. Have a good time.

**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://www.bandcamp.com/artist/djw-sounds). 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](https://MaximumFun.org) and is distributed by NPR.

*(Music fades out.)*