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(ADVERTISEMENT)

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: Thumpy synth with festive jingle bells.

Jesse Thorn: Oh! Hi, there.

(Crackling fire sounds.)

Happy holidays! Come in.

(Footsteps.)

Have a seat on the couch over there, get cozy. Want any eggnog? Warm cider? It's the *Bullseye* holiday special. I'm your host, Jesse Thorn. We have a great show for you this year, lots of holiday treats in store, some of our favorite holiday interviews from the past. Let's start with an interview. The guest, Lil Rel Howery. He'd been a comic 15+ years when he got his big break, *Get Out*—the smash hit horror movie directed by Jordan Peele. Rel played Rod, the protagonist's best friend. Since then, Rel has gotten his own sitcom, gotten more new specials and parts in dozens of movies. This year, he's starring in the holiday romcom *Unexpected Christmas*.

When I talked with him in 2023, he had just finished *Dashing Through the Snow*. That movie stars Ludacris as Eddie Garrick, a social worker and father who dreads the holidays. Rel plays Nick, a jolly old man in a big red suit who may or may not be Santa Claus.

Here's a little bit from *Dashing Through the Snow*. This scene's early on in the movie. Eddie is pet-sitting for some friends. He discovers Nick rummaging through his friend's fridge.

Transition: Music swells then fades.

Clip:

Eddie (*Dashing Through the Snow*): Hey. You hear me talking to you?!

(Rustling noises.)

Hey, that's not your fridge!

Nick: I mean, seriously?! Simple dictums, tenants, traditions, time honored customs?

Eddie: (*Whispered.*) What?

Nick: Capers? So, they got capers but no bagels, no lox, no green onion shmears?!

Eddie: What are you doing?

Nick: I'm looking for cookies and milk! And they don't have either. They don't have neither—either. Ugh, you know something? I've never been clear on the difference between neither and either. Are you?

Eddie: Neither matters right now, because it seems as if you've broken into my neighbor's home.

Transition: Music swells then fades.

Jesse Thorn: Rel, welcome to *Bullseye*. It's really nice to meet you. I really enjoyed the movie.

Lil Rel Howery: Thanks for watching. It's so funny listening to that, because my kids say I do my performance voice like on everything I'm in, which is really true. I think it was a thing. And they're like, "That ain't your performance voice." And I'm like what that supposed to mean? "Your voice gets really high pitch when you're on screen, you get like—you know." Because usually you—like you, I'd say I'm pretty chill. So, I was like show me the performance voice. And they're like, (*in a fast-talking, nasally intonation*) "Hey, man, what's happening right now?"

(*They chuckle.*)

But I do. It's funny that they noticed that though. It was like, oh, alright.

Jesse Thorn: I talked to a voice coach for a minute, and my goal was to sound less pretentious on hosting my NPR show.

(*Lil Rel laughs.*)

And I said, "Well, listen to my comedy show! Like, that's how I really talk."

And she listened to it, and she's like, "That's not how you really talk. That's how you do jokes. That's a very different voice."

(They laugh.)

She's like, "NPR pretentious Jesse is much closer to the normal—"

Lil Rel Howery: It's just settings are different. And you know, especially when you learn to perform—even when I'm on stage, I know I bring more energy on the stage, and then—like I do on screen. So, I tell them, "I'm not going to go around just in the chill part of my life like *(high pitched)* hey, everybody!"

I'm not doing that. That's just insane.

Jesse Thorn: What's it like to wear a Santa suit through an entire movie? Because it's a sumptuous Santa suit.

Lil Rel Howery: Very hot. So, I had to wear a fat suit along with the suit. And so, these boots are really hot. It was really hot. So, my trailer was like freezing. Freezing. My assistant used to be in there with a blanket on and a coat. And this is in the summertime. People are like, "Why she got a coat on?"

"Because like his trailer is freezing."

So, I used to like, in between shots, go right to the trailer. They kept the trailer close to us most of the time where we were shooting at. Yeah, it was reeeally hot, though. Because it was like in the summer when we were shooting in Atlanta.

Jesse Thorn: There may be show business magic involved in this. But I'm not going to lie, it looks like a very heavy outfit.

Lil Rel Howery: Yes! But what made it work—now, see, it's took a couple things, and I hate I couldn't even really use it for real. So, everything I had to do was before I came on set. So, you know, I do work out all the time—right?—and that's my thing. And that was a big part of it actually to do this role. Ludacris had a trailer gym on set, which used to make me mad.

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'Cause I'm like why are you using—? I'm the one wearing this suit.

(They laugh.)

And he was always in the trailer gym. Yeah. I'm like—'cause I couldn't take everything off. Once I put the suit on, I had to wear it for the whole day. It was like using the bathroom twice a day, maybe. Because it was a lot going on. Now that I think about it, because it's one of those things you want to forget about a little bit. It was a lot.

(They laugh.)

It was a lot. It made me think about Robin Williams in *Mrs. Doubtfire*. I'm like, yo, that had to be crazy.

Jesse Thorn: You seem like a guy who makes really considered choices about his career.

(Lil Rel confirms.)

How did you decide that you wanted to do a just straight-ahead, family Christmas movie?

Lil Rel Howery: Well, it was offered to me, first of all. *(Chuckles.)* But also, I—

Jesse Thorn: Is Lil Rel offer only, or are you—?

Lil Rel Howery: I'm offer—I haven't auditioned for anything since *Get Out*. So, all the almost 20-something movies I've done since then, since *Get Out*, it's all been just offers. Which is dope. It's not even a brag; it's like I didn't even know that's how that works. But I don't know, maybe—every time I tell somebody else that, that's like doing really well, they're like, *(seriously)* “I still—I still self-tape.”

I'm like, *(awkwardly)* “Ah! Okay.”

Jesse Thorn: People are trying to bring in a Lil Rel. They're not—like, you're not trying to go to those auditions where it says, “Lil Rel type”.

Lil Rel Howery: Just for me, right? Wouldn't that be weird?

Jesse Thorn: I know people who've gone to those auditions and not gotten it!

Lil Rel Howery: And saw themselves as the type?

(Jesse confirms.)

That is hysterical. That's got to be a lot of pressure, too.

Jesse Thorn: So, you're offer only, but you wanted to do— They called.

Lil Rel Howery: I want to do—I do have intentions on—so, Steve Martin is one of my favorite actors and comedic actors in general. And I knew once I hit my 40s, just being honest, I'm like, “Yo, I just want to find like family—either dad stuff or stuff like Santa Claus.” And like Steve Martin has made a killing from that. I feel like that's an open market to just do like *Santa Claus* or *Father of the Brides* and all that stuff. Old men, relationships, divorce.

Jesse Thorn: You were looking for your *Daddy Daycare*?

Lil Rel Howery: I'm looking for *Daddy Daycare*, *The Father of the Bride*. Shoot, *The Birdcage*. (Laughs.) Any of that! Like, I like stuff like that. Like, but Steve Martin has the blueprint to that. He is absolutely brilliant at finding that. I can't even—'cause you remember, at one time he was like a really silly—he was a rockstar comic actually at one time. And then one day he just became Dad.

Jesse Thorn: Well, he was 25 years old and looked 45 years old, so he was prepared. You know what I mean?

Lil Rel Howery: (Laughs.) But it's a great genre! You know, like the *Cheaper by the Dozens*. And he's done really well at that; he just looks so happy. He's one of those guys that makes sweaters and like what I have on—this is—look at what I have on. I have a sweater with the collar out. That's a Steve Martin move. That's a Steve Martin dad move. He just looks comfortable.

Jesse Thorn: I don't know that Steve Martin would be wearing the watch that you're wearing right now, though.

Lil Rel Howery: You gotta mix it up. I'm still from the west side of Chicago, man.

Jesse Thorn: There's only one little light in here, and I can hardly see your face because of the reflections off those rocks.

Lil Rel Howery: I tell people this all the time. I live a chill—it's only certain things that I knew I had to like... (Chuckles.) It's like certain hood purchases, I like to call them.

A good watch and then a really nice car with some nice rims on it. But that's where it stops. I don't do—overdo anything for the most part. But everybody—I was meeting with Morgan Freeman yesterday, and he kept bringing up my watch. And I had to like put the sleeve over it.

(They laugh.)

(Voice pitched low like Morgan Freeman's.) "I like the watch."

So, I'm like, (whispering to himself) "Dang, man, you need to stop talking about the watch, Morgan Freeman. There's so much other things we could talk about."

(They laugh.)

"You have such a great career. Why don't we—can we—" I tried to change the subject to *Lean on Me*. "You remember that time when Joe Clark had walked in the bathroom, and then you made the boy sing the song?"

He's like, "But the watch."

I'm like, ugh!

(*They laugh.*)

Jesse Thorn: If you give the example of Steve Martin, one of the great comedy geniuses of our time, *Father of the Bride* is a good movie. Some of those movies are terrible movies.

Lil Rel Howery: What?! Name one!

Jesse Thorn: Well, I'm—

Lil Rel Howery: Name one! Name one!

Jesse Thorn: I'm not here to specifically insult *Cheaper by the Dozen* or whatever.

Lil Rel Howery: Great movie.

Jesse Thorn: Okay. So, you are not concerned, if you go full dad, that you're being corny or embarrassing yourself or any of the things that somebody might be worried about?

Lil Rel Howery: Nope! Because I mean, being a dad—we're very embarrassing. You gotta own that. You gotta own that, at some point, your kids— And that's what's so—

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I think that's why Steve Martin has a great career. He's owned the fact that he's okay with looking like the embarrassing dad. And it makes you millions and millions of dollars. And that is what Steve Martin is doing. And I'm like, yo, if he can do it, I don't have to be cool. I am fine with not being cool no more. It's too many people like in their 60s still trying to look cool. And it doesn't make any sense.

Jesse Thorn: It's the *Bullseye* Holiday Special. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is standup comic and actor Lil Rel Howery.

I want to play a clip from your special from last year, *I Said It. Y'all Thinking It*. And this is one of the freshest takes on “kids these days” that I've ever seen in a stand up special.

(*They laugh.*)

Usually— I'm going to be honest, usually the second somebody gets into “this is what young people are like”, I'm out. Because it usually goes straight into like you know, something about woke culture or something. Some whiny stuff. This is miraculous, I thought. Let's take a listen.

Sound Effect: Music swells and fades.

Clip:

Lil Rel Howery (*I Said It. Y'all Thinking It*): You be like, “Little man, what you wanna do?”

“(Censor beep) whatever.”

(*The audience laughs.*)

And I try to be positive. Yes, yes, young man! You can put your mind to anything! You can do whatever you want! But I'm saying, what would you like to do?

(*Mildly irritated.*) “I don't know. Like, reading or (*mumbles*) businesses-es... Something. Nursing?”

He's just throwing out (*censor beep*).

“Doctors? You know what I'm saying? You know what I mean? Gonna go sell cars, you know what I'm saying?”

Sound Effect: Music swells and fades.

Jesse Thorn: I was really stunned by— The thing that I like wrote down in my head as I was watching that was like how can he be so specific about vagueness? Like, the specificity of those vaguenesses—

(*Lil Rel laughs.*)

‘Cause it's maddening to think, “Here I am—adult man—worked so hard, so much focus to get to do something. The audacity of not trying and succeeding because of the magic of youth—” (*Laughs.*)

Lil Rel Howery: I'm gonna tell you something. You remember like all the times they like—they would describe a surfer dude. You remember *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*? The guy who's just like, (*stereotypical surfer voice*) “Dude, I don't even know, dude.” I mean, Keanu Reeves represent that. Even though he—I'm not saying Keanu Reeves was any of those guys, but he played so many of them. Watching him be John Wick is still insane to me. ‘Cause like, I cannot believe that guy, who's just, (*dopily*) “I don't—I don't know. What?” But honestly—and real talk—that's who becomes successful! The guy who doesn't know what the hell is going on! He don't care about society. He not going to school. Even when I do the young guy like, “I don't know, a doctor?” 10 years from now, he could be a doctor! And nobody would know how he had a practice!

Jesse Thorn: I think that is a good working definition of White privilege.

(*Lil Rel laughs.*)

I mean, it doesn't encompass the whole idea. But if you want to just get the gist, it's a 15-year-old boy who says “doctors” and then becomes successful.

Lil Rel Howery: Well, you know, it's funny. I mean, unfortunately it's not even—I would love to just put it on White privilege, but (*chuckling*) it's not. Some of it's hood privilege. You got—I have cats I grew up with that had no—they are so successful now.

And I did not see that coming. I don't care if they found a real estate lick. Like, they'd be like, “I'm going to be good. Watch. Yeah. Okay.” You're like, wait, you own what?! This neighborhood?! HOW?

Jesse Thorn: Were you always a try-hard?

Lil Rel Howery: I think so. I think to this day, I like to be really good at stuff. I like to be really good at stuff. So, I study—like, I'm a comedy TV film nerd. Like, you know, I'll watch everything on this— Which just honestly makes it tough for me sometimes to be on sets if—sometimes if I feel like things ain't right, it drives me crazy. Like, if I see a setup is wrong or a take too long or even with jokes sometimes, you know. I remember telling somebody one time, he was like, “Try the joke!”

And I'm like, “This is not funny. I can't do this. I'm telling you, it's not funny.” And then you get to the point where like, “Well, let's do this tonight. Let's go to a comedy club. Let's both do sets. If you have a way better set than mine, I will say whatever the hell you want.” (*Laughs.*) I don't know. That sounds crazy, because like when you've been doing comedy for so long as somebody that doesn't have—because standup gives you a real experience of seeing when something works right away. And if you haven't experienced that, sometimes I think like you don't get the rhythm of things. Some people just write stuff just 'cause they think it sounds—and it sounds crazy.

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I've read things where I'm like this is not funny. It's just mean. We gotta find the humor in this. It's just a mean statement. And then they try to laugh at it. Like, that's one thing about sitcoms where I love when you're doing a rehearsal and all the writers—you can tell who wrote the joke. Because they be dying laughing. Even if you deliver it bad, they're like (*forced cackling*). Like, come on, fam. I did it on purpose. You're just trying to make sure that—that's weird.

But I don't write jokes like that. Like, I think that's what I love about a lot of my friends is the honesty. Like, I got a good group of comedic friends who are so honest.

Jesse Thorn: What were your Christmases like when you were a kid?

Lil Rel Howery: Really fun! You know, we used to make our own decorations when we were little kids. My dad—was really, really artsy. Like—and it's so interesting about my father, because like—because now I've learned two things. You start learning more stuff about your family when you become an adult. Also, you become the adult that's like taking

care of stuff most of the time. So, now everybody's telling you the truth about everything. You're like, wait a minute, what?!

And what I love about my dad was my uncles and his cousins all called him a square, because he was a very artsy guy. This dude—my father could build a stereo from scratch. I remember our Nintendo broke. He never worked for Nintendo ever. He took it apart, put it back together, and it worked again. I'm like, “How did you do it?!” He just had a knack for like electronics and just doing stuff. And then also he was a very artsy, you know, guy. He like would make all these different models and, you know, he'll go to the hobby shop. I didn't know the hobby shop exists! He always like, “I'm going to the hobby shop now.”

I remember at one point, I don't know if my mama thought he was cheating on her, because he'd go to the hobby shop all the time. But he was really doing stuff! But I was like, “What's a hobby—? It's a place to sell stuff for people who have hobbies?”

He'd be like, “I'm going to the hobby shop.”

And it wasn't until I got old, and I started repeating that—like, what the hell? And then I found a hobby shop. I'm like, oh! He wasn't—

Jesse Thorn: You learned about balsa wood.

Lil Rel Howery: It's so much random—! It's a hobby shop!

Jesse Thorn: Different types of glue. This is what they sell at the hobby shop.

Lil Rel Howery: I'm not even lying. It's a hobby shop! It was literally remote-control car parts. He was building ships from scratch. He like did a World War II thing. He made—like, my dad was extremely creative. So, because of that, we made our own Christmas ornaments for years. So, all the way until we got to about 16, the tree mostly was everything we made from over the years. It was like—two things now I think about. I'm like, well, either they were cheap, and they didn't want to buy any ornaments. And my dad was like, “We'll make our own ornaments!” And then that's what we've been doing. But as a kid, it felt fun to be making our own like Christmas wreaths and little horses and the little like miniature Christmas guys to put on there and the little Santas we did. And we painted it.

Man, we did that for years. And it was just a thing.

Jesse Thorn: Do you remember one that you made?

Lil Rel Howery: I made a bunch of them. I like made a—like, my favorite one was—well, it was a random horse I would make every year. Like, so it was like one horse that was—like, I knew where my horse was going on the tree. Yeah, it was stupid.

Jesse Thorn: You said that like that was something I would intuitively understand.

Lil Rel Howery: (*Chuckling.*) Yeah, I don't know.

Jesse Thorn: You know how you make a horse, because there's a place for the horse on the tree.

Lil Rel Howery: That's how—you know, it's funny. Most people's childhoods, you think everybody else is doing something until you tell them, "You know, we made our Christmas ornaments."

They'll be like, "Man, shut up!" Like, never mind. "Hey, y'all, they making Christmas ornaments, dummies!"

It's like, (*whispered*) "Dang, they don't spend time with their families. Let me shut up. I don't want to get jumped over telling people I spend time with my parents." (*Laughs.*) Yeah. That's funny, too. I mean, it's not funny, but it was a lot of times where like I used to be almost embarrassed how involved my parents was, which is crazy. Because everybody else didn't have it like that. And it's like—because people will—that's funny. People will pick on you with the most positive thing going on in your household.

(*Loudly.*) "Hey, everybody! Look at—look at them coming here, volunteering! His parents here to volunteer, y'all! (*Laughs meanly.*) They always showing up for him! (*Laughs meanly again.*)"

It's like, damn, stop showing up!

Jesse Thorn: I think my experience is and was that like there's a lot to be said for you're in the hood, and people are picking on you for being corny or trying hard. But there's also, a lot more than there is given credit for, people being like, "No, no, no. He's one of the guys that is corny and tries hard. We all—go ahead. You know. He's doing his corny, try-hard thing."

Lil Rel Howery: Well, let me tell you something. I've been—

Jesse Thorn: Like, there's a lane for that. You know what I mean?

Lil Rel Howery: So, it had—that was a part of my growing up too. Because like—it's so funny. I remember in high school I was ditching a class one day with a guy who like—

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—'cause where I went to high school at, we had different gangs in the school. And this guy like—he's one of the leaders of the—and he was ditching too. And he was like, "Yo, what you doing?" I'm like, yo, I'm ditching school. He's like, "Man, you one of the dudes just trying to be somebody! Go to class, fam!" You know, I'm like, what? "I got you; go to class." Like, and he ended up making sure nobody bothered me really throughout my next four years of high school. 'Cause he was like, "Yo, you could be somebody." Which is so interesting! Like, he was doing—you know what I mean? He didn't want me to be a part of the dumb

stuff, which I thought was cool. And I'm like that—so, it did exist, which is very interesting. *(Chuckles.)*

Jesse Thorn: Did you have the idea that you were going to be something in particular?

Lil Rel Howery: I knew I was going to do—my senior year of high school is when I knew I can really do this. I did a play, and a teacher let me write my own jokes and stuff like that. And I—once again, I went to one of them hood schools. So, like they will heckle anybody. We'll have somebody come speak to us positively like, *(loudly)* “I don't want to be nobody! Go home, fam!” You know, that type of thing. And so, like you're scared to perform in front of them. You're like—

Jesse Thorn: That's when the Reverend Jesse Jackson came?

Lil Rel Howery: *(Laughs.)* “We don't care about you, Jesse! You got Dr. King killed!”
Woah, woah, woah, woah!

(They laugh.)

But no. But my first joke hit really hard. That was the first time I felt the roar of laughter from a group. And I was like, ooh, this is addictive. That was something I wrote, and it was—it killed. It's so fun, because it's a play. So, usually I kind of look at them—you know, you're a character, and you hear the laugh like... *(whispers)* Yes! More lines! And then you start doing your other lines. But Yeah, I remember that after we were done doing it for all the different classes—like, the freshman, sophomores, there was a play we did. Seniors and juniors. And every show killed. And I was like, oh, I can actually do this.

And then I was walking around—I felt like *Teen Wolf* walking around school. You know, like when he became the—when he was the wolf, and he started running around just as the wolf, and everybody loved him? That's what I felt like when I—*(laughs)* after the play, I was like, wow! Like, people was like, “Oh man, you were so—you're the next Jamie Foxx!” I'm like, wow, okay! I can do this. Cool! And that's what I knew. I was like, alright, I gotta figure out how to jump into standup.

And I was very specific, too. I was like I want to act, I want to do stand up, I want to direct, and I want to write. That's exactly what I wrote down. *(Chuckles.)*

Jesse Thorn: I mean, when you say you were very specific, you wrote down all of the categories of—

Lil Rel Howery: I wrote down literally all of that, and I said it out loud. I'm not even lying to you. I said in the auditorium. They let me get a period off after one of the plays we did, so I just sat there in the dark by myself, and I wrote that down, and I just said it out loud. “I want to—I want to act. I want to be a standup, and I want to write, and I want to direct.” And from that point on, whatever—I never had a plan B. That was it.

Jesse Thorn: Did you have a plan A? Did you have a way to—?

Lil Rel Howery: *(Sighs.)* It was little stuff. So, the *Chicago Sun-Times* used to have a weekend plus like newspaper magazine on Fridays that let you know everything that's going on on the weekend. And there used to be a list of comedy clubs in there. And I said, well, when I graduate high school, I'm going to show up at one of these spots. And that's what I did. I showed up at a place called The Lion's Den on the north side of Chicago when I was 19. And that's where I started doing standup. And I don't even think I—I don't even know how I did the first time. I was happy I went on the stage! I was like, oh, I'm on the stage! I had to sign the list. And you sit there.

It's so funny. The Lion's Den is as big as this room right here. But at that time, it felt like it was the Arie Crown Theater. *(Laughs.)* Because I've never seen nothing like that before. It was a stage. And it was nothing but a room full of comedians. And I have no idea how I did the first time, but I knew I was hooked after that. I was like, oh, this is so cool! I did my jokes and my book, and I went up there, and I did it! And I went down, and I watched everybody else. Then you're like, yeah, I'm a part of it! And then you start hanging out with the comics and like, *(whispering)* oh, they talking to me!

“Yeah, man, see you next Wednesday!” Okay, I'm hooked. And I was hooked after that.

Jesse Thorn: Did you have material?

Lil Rel Howery: Yeah, it was stupid, though. It was so 19ish. I did a joke—I used to do a joke about, you know, when you wear glasses, you get the same threat. You know, they walk up to somebody else like, “Man, if you say something else, I'll slap you. And you with the glasses, I'm gonna knock your damn glasses off your face.” And it was—that was my first joke, based off true experiences. *(Laughs.)*

Jesse Thorn: I mean, in Chicago, it must have been famous— You and I are about the same age. Like, the thing that I remember hearing about was Bernie Mac doing standup on L trains.

Lil Rel Howery: I mean, but by that time though—'cause I'm 44, or I'll be 44 in a couple of weeks. And Bernie was already like Bernie. Like, he's becoming this—you know.

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But you know, Chicago already made—I'll never forget the first really like room I went to where it was a bunch of Black comedians. When I first started, I didn't know where the Black comics were, actually. You had to find those rooms. And once I did, it felt like I was in the best of Def Jam *ComicView*. I remember it was a payphone in the bathroom. I called my brother. I said, “Bro, everybody's here performing.” ‘Cause when I tell you everybody I saw on *ComicView* from Chicago was there the first night I went, and they all destroyed. And I don't know why Damon Williams—I love him to this day. Damon Williams from Chicago; he's one of our OGs in the comedy game. I was new, man! Why you didn't put me up early, brother?! He gonna put me up after the—everybody—six people got like a standing ovation. Only doing five minutes! And then you put the new guy up, with no facial hair, look like a baby, ladies start heckling. I'm cursing out like, *(high pitched)*, “Man, you better shut the *(censor beep)* up with that ugly *(censor beep)* wig!”

And I look like a kid. Like, shut your—you a baby! Get off the stage! And then they started booing me, and then the DJ plays “Someone Please Call 911”. One of the saddest walks off the stage. And you don't leave; you just stand there. I was literally sitting in the crowd just smiling like—(*chuckles*) because I was so like devastated. And one of my good friends to this day, he was the first comic that came over to me. He's like, “Hey, you got to change your material. That was—that was terrible.” (*Laughs.*) Meechie Hall, shout out to Meechie. But he sat there with me. He's like, “You embarrassed, ain't you?”

I'm like, “Yes.”

(*Jesse laughs.*)

“You don't want to get up, do you?”

(*Softly*) “No. I will wait ‘til every person walk out this damn club before I go home.”

(*Laughs.*) Because they was booing me like happily booing me. Ain't nothing like being booed when people like, “BOO!” They smiling! Yeah, that happened to me. I got booed, badly. But I came back the next week, new material, and had a great set.

Jesse Thorn: We'll wrap up with Lil Rel Howery after a quick break. Plus, neo soul singer Sy Smith on the Christmas song that she sings to herself almost every day.

It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

(*ADVERTISEMENT*)

Promo:

Music: Playful, plucky synth.

John Hodgman: Greetings. I am John Hodgman, co-host and co-creator of the *Judge John Hodgman* podcast, along with Jesse Thorn, here on The Maximum Fun Network. And I am here with MaxFun member of the month Keith, who's been a Maximum Fun member since—when, Keith?

Keith: Oh, at least three or four years now. I don't recall exactly when I fell prey to the pledge drive, but it got ahold of me, and I've yet to relent.

John Hodgman: Oh, and we shall not ever let go. Now you join us telephonically from a different country from ours, which is which?

(*Idyllic sounding birdcalls in the background.*)

Keith: I moved to Aveiro, Portugal back in August of this year.

John Hodgman: I hear evening birds chirping behind you. And what are the names of those birds?

Keith: We do have quite a few spoonbills and quite a few flamingos as well.

John Hodgman: So, what would you say to the birds around you and the people listening who are considering supporting the show?

Keith: You know, it's just nice to have a little bit of investment in the things that I love.

(Birdsong quiets down.)

Knowing that I'm making sure that those podcasts are still being created makes me feel good!

John Hodgman: We're so pleased to have you be our Maximum Fun member of the month. Thank you very much, Keith in Portugal: this month's Maximum Fun member of the month.

Keith: Obrigado.

Speaker: Become a MaxFun member now at MaximumFun.org/join.

(Music fades out.)

[00:30:00]

Transition: Thumpy synth with festive jingle bells.

Jesse Thorn: Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. If you're just joining us, get comfy, get warm. We're celebrating the Holidays on *Bullseye* with Lil Rel Howery. He's an actor and a standup comic. You can catch him in the new holiday movie, *Unexpected Christmas*, which is available to rent or buy on demand. He also starred in 2023's *Dashing Through the Snow*. You can stream that on Disney+. Let's get back into our conversation.

One of the things that I found charming about *Dashing Through the Snow* is it's very much set in Atlanta. Which, you know, lots and lots of things shoot in Atlanta because of tax laws, but relatively few things are set in Atlanta, especially so sort of self-consciously. And, you know, you and Ludacris are the stars of the movie. Ludacris's character's wife or partner is darker skinned than he is, which is a relief to see any time in a film or television program when the woman is darker skinned than the man in a romantic partnership.

It is like very unapologetically Black. It also—you know, outside of one quick joke about you being a Black Santa Claus at the beginning—it's not about being Black. And you know, lots of non-Black other people in the movie besides the central characters. Was that something that you wanted specifically to sign up for?

Lil Rel Howery: 100% You know, I've been big on—you know, this is one of my second projects with Disney. Well, not now—maybe more than that. 'Cause Disney own everything. So, maybe it's like the fifth or sixth. I don't even know no more. (*Laughing.*) 'Cause they own all these studios, but I did a show called *Eureka*, a cartoon where I play a dad. The dad of Eureka, the character—the main character. And I remember one of my voiceover sessions, and this is just being honest—I'm loving what's going on with the show. And you know, I have a certain type of cadence to the way I talk. And they had—(*chuckles*) they had the one Black dude I ain't never met. I ain't seen him in none of the sessions.

He just popped up one day like, “Hey, Rel, what's up?” I'm like, yeah, what's up, man? You know, 'cause they had the little Zoom thing. He said, “Hey, we was wondering if, um... You know, 'cause we're loving everything you're doing. It's so amazing. But, you know, we have so many different children watching this. If you can—” You know, I can see how uncomfortable he was.

Like, man, just say it. What do you want me to do?

“Could you, um—you know, because there's so many different kids, maybe take some of the soulfulness out of your—”

I say, “What, you want me to change my voice?! You know who you hired! That's how I talk!” I said, “And second of all, if we're like ‘these are for little kids to watch,’ they need to hear how different people talk. What am I adjusting? (*Beat.*) What am I adjusting?”

Brother then turned this camera off, and then everybody else popped on. So—which is even messed up. They done let that man be on this island by himself. They heard all that! But everybody else's cameras is off.

“No, Rel, we didn't mean—” No, that's insulting! Like, I think—you know, it's no different from the way I grew up. I had to hear—if I watch *Full House*, they're not asking nobody to change their dialect because Black kids are watching it. You know what I'm saying? So, I was like, yo, don't do that. 'Cause what I'm doing is warm. You know what I'm saying? It's a warm voice. It's very warm. Like, let it be what it is.

And that was so interesting to me. And that's why like by the time we get to *Dashing Through the Snow*, and I'm like—I know I'm Black Santa, but that's—I'm glad we didn't focus on just that, because I'm just Santa. Just let me be just Santa! That's not even a real—it's not even a real person! Santa could be whoever the hell we want Santa to be! Which is why, you know, we have these debates about when the *Little Mermaid* is Black or when it like—And?! And I like the fact that, you know, we're standing on that. You know, at the end of the day, it's just—it shouldn't just be about that. We have to think about how we want children to view culture and race. And like, they can come up totally differently if we didn't care about diversifying everything without making it a bigger deal than what should be. Just

make it who the character is. If I want to do *Father of the Bride*, a remake, and I'm the father, then it's all, "This is the Black *Father of the Bride*." No, it's not! We're just remaking a Steve Martin movie, starring Lil Rel. So, I don't know.

Jesse Thorn: I mean, that's sold in the room as far as I'm concerned.

(Lil Rel laughs.)

I don't know if I have the budget to greenlight that, but...

Well, Lil Rel, I sure appreciate you taking the time to be on the show. It was really nice to get to talk to you.

Lil Rel Howery: Yeah, this was a great conversation.

[00:35:00]

Jesse Thorn: Lil Rel Howery from 2023. You can catch him in *Dashing Through the Snow*, in which he stars alongside Ludacris. We also talked about his special from 2022, *I Said It, Y'all Thinking It*. Very funny. Go check it out.

Transition: Thumpy synth with festive jingle bells.

Jesse Thorn: It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. Now for a special holiday edition of the segment we like to call "The Song That Changed My Life". It's a chance for musicians, artists, and other creators to tell us about the music that makes them who they are. This time, it's Sy Smith.

Music: "Perspective" from the album *Sometime a Rose Will Grow in Concrete* by Sy Smith.

Yeah

Your love takes me higher

I don't wanna zoom out

I wanna keep it in perspective

Your love feels like fire

I don't wanna burn out...

(Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: Sy Smith is a brilliant singer, songwriter, and producer who lives here in Los Angeles. She's been recording soul records for over a decade now, and she's collaborated with folks like Kamasi Washington and Thundercat. She's also an immensely in demand backup singer. Name a great, she's sung with them. Sheila E, Chaka Khan, Usher, Whitney Houston.

Her own records are fantastic. And one of them is called *Christmas in Syberspace*.

Music: "Christmas Time is Here" from the album *Christmas in Syberspace* by Sy Smith.

Christmas time is here

Happiness and cheer

Fun for all

The children call their favorite time of year

(Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: That's "Syberspace" with an "S", by the way—as in Sy Smith. When we asked her about her Christmas album and if any of the songs on it had a story we could talk about with her on the show, she talked about "My Favorite Things". And she certainly did not let us down! We won't waste any more time before we get into it. Here's Sy Smith.

Sy Smith: The first time I heard my favorite things was in the movie *The Sound of Music*, of course.

Music: "My Favorite Things" from *The Sound of Music*.

Maria: Raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens.

(Music cues in.)

Bright copper kettles and warm woolen mittens

Brown paper packages tied up with strings

These are a few of my favorite things

(Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue.)

Sy Smith: I think the first time I saw *The Sound of Music*, I was about six or seven years old. I was in my mother's bedroom watching it on TV in our apartment, in Hillcrest Heights, Maryland.

Music:

Cream colored ponies and crisp apple strudels

Doorbells and sleigh bells and schnitzel with noodles

Wild geese that fly with the moon on their wings

These are a few of my favorite things

(Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue.)

Sy Smith: You know, that melody caught my ear because it was such a distinct melody. As a child, that melody just sounded like a dance, to me.

It just sounded like—*(singing along with the tune)* la dada, dada—it just sounded like a dance. *(Laughs.)* If a dance could sing, that's what it would sound like.

Music:

These are a few of my favorite things

When the dog bites

when the bee stings

when I'm feeling sad

I simply remember my favorite things,

And then I don't feel so bad

(Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue.)

Sy Smith: Even on paper, when you look at it, it looks like a dance. You know? And the things that she was singing about were quite abstract to me. You know? Cream colored ponies and, you know, like—I didn't know anything that she was talking about. I didn't know what a schnitzel was. But that melody made me wanna know, you know? *(Laughs.)*

Music:

And then I don't feel so bad

(Music swells to a conclusion.)

Sy Smith: So, the next time that I heard “My Favorite Things” and it really sort of changed my life was when—I might have been about eight or nine. I had an aunt—my aunt Bobbi in Teaneck, New Jersey. She had a little radio in the kitchen, and the Coltrane version came on the radio.

Music: “My Favorite Things” by John Coltrane.

(Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue.)

Sy Smith: I didn't recognize it as “My Favorite Things”, but she began singing it on top of the Coltrane version. And that's when it sort of resonated with me. That's when I went, “Wait! That's that song from the movie.”

I hadn't seen the movie repeatedly, so I didn't walk around singing the soundtrack of—you know, *The Sound of Music*. But when she sang it, it just reminded me of that song and all of the sudden—I don't know, like, it made sense to me. You know what I mean? Like all of a sudden, all of those sort of abstract concepts made sense. Like, “Oh, wow, I can just think of something that I really like and anything that's frightening me will go away.”

[00:40:00]

(A long beat as the music swells.)

I wasn't listening to jazz at all when I was kid. And that was the thing. When she started singing this—on top of this?—it made, all of a sudden, jazz accessible to me. I think, at that point, jazz was just sort of you know. Music that—that older people listened to. It wasn't something that I would go and put on the record player, you know? But when she started singing it, I was like, “Oh! Jazz is something that you can sing along to. Jazz is something that, you know, you can sort of interpret songs that you already know. Jazz is a—can be a template.” That was sort of a new understanding, for me. Like, it was also—it was a discovery.

(A beat as the music plays.)

Everything about that song made me curious. The melody made me curious. When I started listening to really what those words were? That made me want to sort of embrace my own writing a little more. And so often I would replace those lyrics with my own, long before I did this. You know. My current project. I would always just sort of make up my own lyrics in that same pattern. Because I thought it would be cool to sing something that really resonated with me. Things that really were my favorite things, you know?

(Singing) “Jumping on something, swinging on playgrounds, la-dada, dadada, hanging a-around.”

Like, it was probably really silly *(laughing)* like that. There was always something like that. Things that I really liked to do. *(Laughs.)*

(The Coltrane version fades out to be replaced by Sy Smith's version.)

Music: “My Favorite Things” from the album *Christmas in Syberspace* by Sy Smith.

Raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens

(Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue.)

Sy Smith: So yeah, when I decided to do a Christmas project, I knew I wanted to record “My Favorite Things”. It had been on my mind for 20 years. *(Laughs.)*

Music:

These are a few of my favorite things

(la, la, la-la, ba-ba-baba)

(Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue.)

Sy Smith: To finally sit down and record this song—it was the easiest thing to me, because I felt like I’ve been thinking about this for so long. So, it didn’t take me long to, sort of—even rewriting the lyrics, that was, like— I did it in the car on the way to the *(laughs)* studio.

Music:

Shoes with flat laces and oversized glasses

Watching my people rise up from the ashes

Sharing a smile with that guy on the train

These are a few of my...

(Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.)

Sy Smith: And I didn't have to think too hard, because I think those items had been sort of running around my head on and off for the last 20 years.

Music:

Sun shining down on my sisters and brothers

(Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.)

Sy Smith: It—you know, whenever I sing this melody, I just immediately am transported back to my childhood. Just because the melody—you know, Rodgers and Hammerstein, they just created something so beautiful, with that lilting melody. It just lilts, like a—like, I don't know what lilts in nature. *(Laughing.)* You know?

It just *(singing)* dadada, ba-da-la—it sounds like a stick figure just sort of becoming curvy, all of the sudden. You know what I mean? It just sounds like air all of the sudden becoming a form. You know? It sounds like magic. And I—and so when you sit at the piano and sing this, it's just liberating. It's just a lot of fun. I can't describe it any other way. *(Laughs.)*

Music:

These are a few of my favorite things

Knowing you can't keep a good woman down

These are a few of my favorite things

Catching a breeze on that old porch swing

These are a few of my favorite things

(Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then ends.)

Jesse Thorn: Sy Smith on the song that changed her life, “My Favorite Things”. Sy’s Christmas record is called *Christmas in Syberspace*. You can buy or stream it now. If you live in New York, you can see her live. She's performing a special holiday residency with the trumpeter Chris Botti at the Blue Note this month. We'll have a link to dates on the *Bullseye* page at MaximumFun.org.

Music:

These are a few of my favorite things

(Music ends.)

[00:45:00]

Transition: Thumpy synth with festive jingle bells.

Jesse Thorn: It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. This week we're celebrating the holiday season with some of our favorite festive interviews from the past. Next up, Micky Dolenz of *The Monkees*. *The Monkees* was, of course, a television show. It aired from 1966 to 1968, a sort of Hollywood version of *A Hard Day's Night*, four lovable goofs in a band playing songs, bumming around LA, solving mysteries, staying in haunted houses. The band members—Davy Jones, Mike Nesmith, Peter Tork, and Micky Dolenz—weren't a band before the show started. They auditioned for the job. Most of them didn't really play instruments. But man, they had some legit all-time hits.

Music: “Last Train to Clarksville” from the album *The Monkees* by The Monkees.

Take the last train to Clarksville

And I'll meet you at the station

You can be here by 4:30

'Cause I've made your reservation

Don't be slow

Oh, no, no, no

Oh, no, no, no

'Cause I'm leaving in the morning

(Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: So, it's not really a surprise that the band ended up lasting a lot longer than the show. They learned their instruments, started writing their own great songs, the whole deal.

Dolenz is in fact going out on tour early next year for the band's 60th anniversary. When I talked with Micky in 2017, The Monkees had just recorded their 13th studio album, *Christmas Party*. It's a holiday record chockfull of standards and covers as well as a few originals. It's also got contributions from Rivers Cuomo, Peter Buck from REM, and more. Here's the lead track from that album with Micky on lead vocals. It's called "Unwrap You at Christmas".

Music: "Unwrap You at Christmas" from the album *Christmas Party* by The Monkees.

I can't wait to unwrap you at Christmas

I dream of nothing more

So, dear Santa, when you read my letter

Please drop her at my door

I've been waiting

All year now, baby

(Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: Micky Dolenz, welcome to *Bullseye*. It's great to have you on the show.

Micky Dolenz: Great to be here! I am such a big fan of you, your show, actually all of NPR. I even did a challenge a couple of years ago. Big challenge. I'm a huge fan. So, it's so nice to be here with you.

Jesse Thorn: Aw, that's awesome! Thank you for saying that. I have an important question for you. Do you like Christmas? Are you a Christmas person?

Micky Dolenz: Yeeeah. Yeah, I am. Born and raised in the Valley. LA. Not in a huuuge religious sense, just celebrating the equinox (*laughs*), I guess. Celebrating, you know, winter and all that. But yeah. We always had a big, big Christmas.

Jesse Thorn: Do you have fond memories of Christmas when you were a kid?

Micky Dolenz: Oh, of course. Yeah. Wow.

Jesse Thorn: Was it in the valley? Was it like the most classic 1950s suburban Christmas imaginable?

Micky Dolenz: Yes. Absolutely. Hit the nail on the head. My mom—we had this huge picture window looking out over the backyard. Small house, but nice, big picture window. She would do an incredible painting, and she was quite a great artist. And she would do some incredible Christmas—actually, she did it at Easter, also. And, you know, other moments. And she would do this beautiful, you know—what do you call it? Not graffiti. *(Laughs.)* A big painting! You know? On the window. And then with—you know—poster paint. And then wash it off.

Oh yeah, so we actually had very, very classic *American Graffiti* Christmases. And Halloweens and Thanksgivings and, you know, all that stuff. Yeah. Very Norman Rockwell.

Jesse Thorn: Did you listen to Christmas music at Christmas time when you were a kid?

Micky Dolenz: Yeah, not necessarily 'cause I wanted to, but that's what they put on. *(Chuckles.)* Because when you're a kid, your parents run the machine, right?

Jesse Thorn: Well, I mean, some of that stuff is really good, especially at that time.

Micky Dolenz: Oh, it's wonderful.

Jesse Thorn: I mean, you can't argue with your Nat King Coles and your—you know, the crooners made some really great Christmas music.

Micky Dolenz: Oh—no, and funny you should mention him, because he is one of my favorite—my influences, vocally, musically—were people like Nat King Cole, Johnny Mathis—who I just met, actually. You know. Sinatra, who I did meet. Yeah. My influences were all that stuff. And yeah. I love all that stuff.

[00:50:00]

Jesse Thorn: What was the best Christmas present you ever got as a kid?

Micky Dolenz: Ooooh, wow. Great question. I think it probably was a Lionel trainset. A big one. The original, full-size. You know. Massive—I don't know what gauge it was, but... and my dad, who was very handy with building stuff, he built me a big platform in the garage, where the trainset would—you know—be set up. So, that was probably it: a big Lionel, a full-gauge—I don't know what they're called now, but probably a trainset. That was probably it.

Jesse Thorn: Did you get involved in all the mechanics of it? That was like—the dawn of computer programming was people who were really into switching their train sets.

Micky Dolenz: Well, back then, you know—it was still steam-powered. *(Laughs.)* It was—we had to actually put real coal *(laughs)* in the—in the engine. I’ve always been very, very into building stuff. I have a, actually—a woodworking furniture company, with my daughter, called Dolenz and Daughter’s Fine Furniture. And we make handmade, real high-end kind of custom furniture stuff, in a workshop that I have.

I’ve always been into it. My dad was—and over the years I got into it even deeper and deeper. And now I have this business, and I do it for the love of it, you know? I was gonna be an architect. That was my plan.

Jesse Thorn: Really? Because you started acting as a kid. I mean, both your folks were actors, if I'm remembering correctly.

(Micky confirms.)

Was that like the family business, or was that something they were trying to keep you away from?

Micky Dolenz: No, quite the contrary, it was the family business. My dad was an actor. Quite successful. My mom was a singer, actress, until she started having kids and then she became a stay-at-home mom—which thank goodness for us, of course. It was wonderful.

But my dad did real well. Signed to Howard Hughes, of all people, for a while. And I had my first television series when I was ten. It was called *Circus Boy*. It was on NBC—a national, you know, big network show. In the ‘50s. About 1955. Around that time of *Rin Tin Tin* and *Flicka* and *Fury* and all that. And did very well. We ran two or three seasons, until I kind of outgrew the part. And then my parents, very wisely—and by the way, they had never pushed me into it. We weren’t that kind of Hollywood, Beverly Hills lifestyle. Which is fine for some. You know, “Eyes and teeth, honey. Eyes and teeth.”

I was brought up in the Valley and in a very rural, suburban environment. You know, I would come home from shooting on the set and my father would say, “You have to clean the pool.” Had horses on the property and, you know, things like that. So, he was from Italy. Off the boat from Italy. And my mom was from Texas. So, they were kind of no-nonsense people and didn’t let me get away with—well, I was gonna say *(censored)*, but I won’t. Because—

(They laugh.)

Just to bleep it.

Jesse Thorn: Because you know what a classy operation I'm running here?

Micky Dolenz: So, no. They never—I don't ever remember being, you know, pushed and hassled, any sort of pressure at all.

Jesse Thorn: Did you like it?

(Micky confirms.)

I mean was it something that you really wanted?

Micky Dolenz: No. I followed in my father's footsteps, but how could you not like—you know—being—well, now, that series, *Circus Boy*, it was this kid... the spine of it was that it was an orphan kid at the turn of the century, who'd been adopted by a clown, in a circus. And they took care of him, and he turned out being the one that would also solve the—you know, save the day.

So, I'm living for three years, basically, I was living as a ten or twelve-year-old kid, in the circus as the *(laughing)* turn of the century. So, I mean, how can you not like that? I mean, with an—and animals. I learned to ride an elephant. In fact, that was the first thing they said to me. They said, "Okay, well you know you're gonna have to ride an elephant?"

And I said, "Okay! Where do I start?"

(They laugh.)

It's kinda like when I got *The Monkees*. They said, "Well, you're gonna be the drummer." I said, "Okay! Where do I start?"

Jesse Thorn: We're gonna take a quick break. When we return, we will have more with Micky Dolenz of *The Monkees*. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

(ADVERTISEMENT)

[00:55:00]

Promo:

Music: Exciting, playful sax.

Jesse Thorn: On *Judge John Hodgman*, the courtroom is fake, but the disputes are real.

(Gavel bang.)

Gumby Disputer: Brian would say, "I'm the Gumby of this family." He's just not!

Jesse Thorn: Claiming to be Gumby is an un-Gumby-like claim.

Brian: No, it's just Gumby and I being our authentic selves.

(Gavel bang.)

John Hodgman: So, what's your complaint? Too many sauces?

Sauce Litigant: There are no foods on which to put the sauces.

John Hodgman: Have we named all the sauces on the top shelf yet?

Sauce Enthusiast: (Laughing.) Not—not even close.

(Gavel bang.)

John Hodgman: You economize when it comes to pants.

Pants Plaintiff: Truly, it's not about the cleanliness of the pants.

John Hodgman: Well, why isn't it?! This is what I want to know!

(Gavel bang.)

John Hogman: *Judge John Hodgman.* Fake court, weird cases, real justice. On MaximumFun.org, YouTube, and everywhere you get podcasts.

Transition: Thumpy synth with festive jingle bells.

Jesse Thorn: Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. We're celebrating the season with some of our favorite *Bullseye* moments from the past. Right now, I'm talking with Micky Dolenz, founding drummer of The Monkees. They have been a band for 60 years. When Micky and I talked in 2023, The Monkees had just recorded Christmas party—which, you know, I think you can figure out what that album was about. Let's get back into our conversation.

We have a clip of *Circus Boy*. The show in which you starred, as a preadolescent. Or I guess an adolescent. It was, as you mentioned, about a young man whose parents were killed in a trapeze accident. Your character was named Corky. Adopted by Joey the Clown, played by the late Noah Beery Jr. And in this scene, Corky is the water boy to Bimbo, the baby elephant that we've discussed. And in this clip, Corky is there with Bimbo and Joey.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Clip:

(The sounds of many people talking, muffled in the background.)

Corky: Bimbo! You gotta brush your teeth after every meal! ‘Cause if you ever got a toothache, that’d be too bad!

Joey: Hey, Corky. Have you—have you seen JoJo anyplace?

Corky: Gosh, Uncle Joey, is he loose again?

Joey: Oh, you know, I—he figured out how to open up his cage all by himself.
(Laughs.) Ah, half the time I can’t tell who’s training who. Here I’ve been trying to make a clown out of that monkey, and he’s making a monkey out of me!

Corky: Oh, you make a good clown, Uncle Joey. Why aren’t we teaching him how to put on his own makeup in your wagon and—

(The sound of a crash and breaking glass. Music swells. The crashing continues.)

Corky: Uh oh!

Joey: Let’s go! Let’s go!

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Jesse Thorn: Oh, you’re so cute.

(Micky laughs.)

I like your line delivery. I mean, it is the classic-est 1956 child-on-a-television-show line delivery like, *(pitching his voice high)* “Gee whiz!”

Micky Dolenz: *(Laughing.)* Yeah. Absolutely right. I ended up doing a lot of voice overs in the 70’s over cartoons, and it was that same kind of thing. You know, it was—I was, like, always the kid named “Skip” doing Hanna-Barbera cartoons going, *(undulating his pitch up and down)*, “WOOAH! Oh no! Look out! Here we GOOO!”

Jesse Thorn: Tell me where you were in your life when you got the part on *The Monkees*.

Micky Dolenz: I had gone back to high school, after *Circus Boy*. My parents, very wisely, took me out of the business. I had been offered another show, they told me, years later. But I was turning 13, going into puberty, and I—they sent me to a child psychologist. They said it was an educational counselor, but looking back now, I know it was a shrink. With Rorschach and all that. And I guess, you know, he must have *(laughs)* said, *(with an exaggerated,*

cartoonish German accent) “You must take this child out of the business immediately!” Because, as we’ve heard, the horror stories—the problems come, with child stars, after the fact. Not during. During the, you know—during the success you’re glorified, they love you, everybody loves you, and you’re taken care of, cosseted. And then, all of the sudden one day, you’re a has-been. You’re out of work and you’re just entering puberty, which is tough enough as it is. But now, you’re not only entering puberty, but you’re a has-been entering puberty!

And my parents, I don’t know. They just, wisely—I guess with the aid of this child psychologist—said, “No, we’re not gonna let him do another show. He’s going back to school.”

[01:00:00]

Public school, right off of the set. And I literally, one morning—one Monday morning—ended up back in junior high school—what they called it then—as a ninth grader, with my roots—my brown roots growing out from my blonde, bleached hair from the TV series.

And so, they threw me right back into the real world. And then, after high school, I went to college doing anthropology, psychology, a couple of other—I got into science, you know? I got into electronics and was really getting into science and building stuff and I—you know, my father then passed away, the year after I got out of high school. Which did present some problems, obviously. And I was at a bit of loose end. I would be doing little guest shots. I had an agent and the agent would get me a little job on Peyton Place or Mr. Novak or one of these late-50’s, early-60’s shows. And—but my—but that wasn’t my plan, you know. I was doing it kind of for summer money.

And a friend of mine said, “You know, we both like building stuff.” Which I—we did, both of us, and I—you know, I had workshop even then. And he said, “Let’s be architects! And start a little architectural firm.” So, I enrolled into LA Trade Tech. I just got an honorary award. Not award. What do you call it? Honorary degree from them. I did about a year and half—two, three semesters—but in the summers, when I wasn’t, you know, going to school, I would do these little TV shows. And, you know, guest shots. And—but I wasn’t stupid. I mean, I knew the power of showbiz. I’d had a series. I knew how, you know, valuable and important and life-changing it can be.

And so, one pilot season, in 1965, comes along. And my agent—I had an agent and I was going to school every day. And he would say, “Hey I got an audition for you, three o’clock on Thursday, blah (*drones unintelligibly*).”

Some I would go to, some I would say, “I’m sorry, I got a test.” (*laughs.*) And I didn’t. So, the Monkee audition comes along. I did, even at the time, sort of sense this was kind of different. Especially in the fact that you had to be able to sing and play—and act—to get into the audition or get through it. So, clearly they must have had in mind, at the time, that they were going to, kind of, you know—create this sort of, you know, real musical entity, I guess.

My audition piece, on guitar, was “Johnny B. Goode” by Chuck Berry. I still do it, to this day. And then there was acting and scene study and improv. And the improv, I had the most trouble with. Mostly I’m uncomfortable. And I am still, to this day, with improv. ‘Cause I was raised, you know, to learn the script, read the lines, and show up and do the scene and go home.

And so, the audition process was quite extensive. But my agent calls and says, “You got the pilot!” And I was in school, studying to be an architect.

And I said, “Great!” And I took off ten days, to do the pilot. And then I went back to school! *(Chuckles.)* Because I knew that nine out of ten pilots don’t sell! And I wasn’t gonna take a chance, so I went back to school, studying to be an architect. And then when we got the order for the first season—the 26 episodes, so the first season—I didn’t—then I decided I better quit school.

Jesse Thorn: I have a clip from the TV show, *The Monkees*, and it’s from an episode called “The Monkees Watch Their Feet”, in which you—Micky—are abducted by aliens!

(Micky laughs and confirms.)

In a classic Monkees’ storyline. So, we’re about to hear, either you are on a—you’ve been beamed onto a flying saucer. You are then cloned by the blue-skinned captain and his assistant. Then your evil robot double is unleashed back into the world to spy on the other Monkees—Peter Tork and Michael Nesmith.

(Micky confirms.)

Let’s take a listen.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Clip:

Davy Jones: Hey, Micky, isn’t that a spaceship over there?

Narrator: That was the powerfully persuasive argument of the space alien.

Speaker 1: What does a spaceship look like?

(Audience laughs.)

Davy: Well, I don’t know! I never saw one before!

Speaker 1: Then how do you know it is a spaceship?

Speaker 3: He's right, man. Probably some new drive-in.

(Audience laughs. Banjo music begins.)

Narrator: Another way to recognize an alien is to take note of strange behavior.
Takes some notes on this next scene.

(Audience laughs.)

[01:05:00]

Robot Micky: *Hello, (inaudible).* I'm here in enemy *(stuttering, voice strained)* head—headquarters. They have harmonic destructors here, like we do on Slavig and when they use them, they emit terrible—ah, horrible, sounds! They also have insufferable tortures here, on earth.

(A phone rings.)

Whenever a pussycat cries, they tear off its head!

(Audience lets out some “ooh”s and “oof”s.)

Narrator: Definitely not.

Robot Micky: Then they holler in its ear!

Narrator: Oh no.

Robot Micky: Then they put the head back on the body. I don't know how it stays alive!

(A discordant note plays.)

Davy: Micky? Who were you talking to, just then?

Robot Micky: No one.

Davy: Well, you're acting very strange, you know.

Robot Micky: I'm not acting strange; I'm acting perfectly normal. There's nothing strange about me.

(A metallic screeching sound followed by a phone ringing. The audience laughs.)

Don't tear off that cat's head again, I can't stand it!

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Jesse Thorn: It is a lot of nonsense for a television show in the mid-1960s.

Micky Dolenz: Ho-boy! A lot! But, you know, interesting you should say that. If you look back—and I've studied it. I've done lectures, now. People have asked me, you know, for years—you know, what was it? How was it? How did it happen? It wasn't that—if you look back, it really wasn't that—I don't know, what's the word? I guess surprising! Because the producers had made some very clever early-on decisions, when they were doing their bible—which is the essence of a show.

For starters—and funny enough, I was just listening to an interview you did with Eric Idle, who I know—have known for years. And he was talking about *Monty Python's*, and the mentioned how the humor was not topical. *The Monkees'* humor was not topical. Nor was it satirical. And I think that's one of the reasons why *The Monkees*—and *Monty Python* (*laughs*), and *I Love Lucy* and other shows—stand up for so long. Because they're not topical. And that was a conscious decision that the producers made. We're not gonna talk about anything in the news this week. We're not gonna do anything too satirical.

It was another friend of mine—a guy named John Lennon—(*playfully*) ope! Did I drop that name?

Jesse Thorn: (*Amused.*) I'll grab it for you.

Micky Dolenz: I got it. —who said The Monkees are like the Marx Brothers. And if you look at *The Monkees* show—the project, the whole thing—as this sort of half hour Marx Brothers musical movie on television, everything makes a whole lot more sense. If you think of an old Marx Brothers movie, where everybody ran around and danced and sang and had a plot and there was a bad guy and good guy and people were doing silly stuff. And you know, that scene you just played could have been right out of a Marx Brothers movie!

We were screened Marx Brothers movies during the preparation process, for instance. So, it was not coincidental. I mean, there was some thought put behind this that the show would not be topical. It would not be satirical. 'Cause that would date it very quickly. And also, a very important point—I think—is that The Monkees were never successful. It was the struggle for success. 'Cause that, I think, is what endeared it to all those kids around the world was that we represented all those kids in their garages and their basements and their kitchens and wherever—in their garage—trying to be The Beatles.

And that is essentially what *The Monkees* show was about: this band that wanted to be The Beatles. And on the television show, we never made it. It was always the struggle for success that I think is, like I said, one of the things that endeared it to so many people.

Jesse Thorn: Did you want to be lovable Marx Brotherian goofballs? Or did you want to be cool rock stars when the possibility that you actually maybe could be cool rock stars came up?

Micky Dolenz: In my case, it was— I woke up one day and— I fell asleep one night as a working actor, entertainer, singer—you know, musician, ‘cause I had to do all that. And I woke up in the morning as a cool rock star! (*Laughs.*) And I hadn’t—I was like, “Woah! When did that happen!?”

It’s kind of exemplified in a story I’ve told a bunch of times. During the— The show went on the air in September of ’66. (*Breaks into startled laughter. Jesse chuckles.*) Wh-what—what century are we in, here? Uh. (*Laughs.*) In September of ’66. And we’d been filming since June or July. And recording, of course, all the time. Day and night. I was doing most of the lead singing. So, I would go on the set from seven in the morning to seven at night and then have dinner and then go into the studio and record vocals—sometimes two or three a night.

[01:10:00]

‘Cause they needed so much material for the television show.

And um, (*clears throat*) one— And then that Christmas—this time, that year, ’66—they gave us a hiatus. The show’d been on the air since September. We’d heard that it was doing very well. We’d heard that “Clarksville” had gone to number one, but we’re working 12/14 hours a day. In those days, of course, without social media and all that other kind of stuff—you know, I’d get in my car in the parking lot and drive home and never see anybody, never interact. The fans didn’t know where we were or how to find us. You know. You just went home.

And that Christmas, I was gonna drive up to San Jose—where my parents and family lived at the time—with my Christmas presents and have about a week—or ten days, whatever it was—off and a little hiatus. So, I get my little Christmas list together, and I get in my car, and I drive down to the local mall there in the Valley in Los Angeles—where I’d shopped every year for decades with my family. And I get out of my car with my little list, and I walk through the big glass doors. And all of the sudden, people come running at me screaming! And I thought it was a fire! (*Chuckles.*) And I’m holding open the door going, “Slow down! Don’t run! Don’t panic! It’s—”

I literally did think it was a fire! And they were running at me! And I had to leave. I was really pissed off! (*Laughs.*) I had to go and give my Christmas list to my roadie and have him go do the shopping. Got in my car and had to go home. Well, that was the first inkling that I had of what was going on.

Jesse Thorn: I mean, it sounds neat, but it also sounds... hard.

Micky Dolenz: (*Chuckles.*) Oh, it was a lotta work! Oh boy@ Each episode took three days. And then start the next one the very next day. And then we started rehearsing for the concert tour, 'cause they obviously had in mind that if this thing happened, they wanted us to be able to play, or they would not have cast people that could! They wouldn't have bothered. They would have just cast actors and done it all—everything else, you know—kind of old school.

But they clearly had in mind that they wanted—they hoped!—that if the thing happened, if the show went, that we would go on the road and record. I mean— And perform. And sure enough, you know, we did! And our first concert was in Hawaii, in Honolulu, at the HIC Auditorium. I don't know how many thousands of people were there. And I think that their plan was, “Well if we do it in Hawaii (*laughing*), and it doesn't work, no one will know!”

Jesse Thorn: We'll have three weeks before news reaches the mainland.

Micky Dolenz: (*Giggling.*) That's right. But it did, and it was huge. Mike Nesmith, I think, put it very succinctly one once he said, you know, “At that point, Pinocchio became a real little boy.”

Jesse Thorn: Micky Dolenz, thanks so much for being on *Bullseye*. It was great to get to talk to you.

(*Music fades in.*)

Micky Dolenz: Well, I hope that was okay for you guys. Thank you!

Music: “I Wish It Could Be Christmas Everyday” from the album *Christmas Party* by The Monkees.

When the snowman brings the snow

Well, he just might like to know

He's put a great big smile on somebody's face

(*Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue.*)

Jesse Thorn: Micky Dolenz of The Monkees. Their record is called *Christmas Party*. You can catch The Monkees on their 60th anniversary tour next year. We'll have a link to dates on the *Bullseye* page.

Music:

... sweet Santa Claus is on the way

Well, I wish it could be Christmas everyday

When the kids start singing and the band begins to play

Oh, I wish it could be Christmas everyday

Let the bells ring out for Christmas!

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: It's the *Bullseye* Holiday special. I'm Jesse Thorn. For a while on our program, we used to wrap things up with an essay: a recommendation from me, called "The Outshot". And many years ago—a little more than a decade, 2014—I wrote and recorded a recommendation for what is probably my favorite holiday thing ever, the *Pee-Wee's Playhouse* Christmas special. Let's listen.

Transition: Thumpy synth with festive jingle bells.

Jesse Thorn: So, I don't have a lot of holiday traditions, personally. I mean, I love Christmas. I used to do it twice a year—once with dad and once with mom. It was great Two trees, two sets of presents, two bottles of eggnog from Mitchell's Ice Cream.

[01:15:00]

I just don't have a lot of special things that I do now as a grownup. There is one, though. Every year, I make some time for the *Pee-Wee's Playhouse* Christmas special.

Music: "Pee-Wee's Playhouse Christmas Special Theme Song" from the *Pee-Wee's Playhouse* Christmas special.

Oh, it's Christmas in the Playhouse

And our hearts are all aglow

As we welcome you to the Playhouse

And to Pee-Wee's Christmas special!

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: The Playhouse was a crazy postmodern version of mid-century America: cowboys and puppets and hipster jazzbos. The perfect place to have a crazy Christmas—something that celebrates warmth and giving and kindness but is also completely insane. Like ice skating with Little Richard.

Clip:

Pee-Wee: Hi, little Richard! How's it going?

Little Richard: Hi, Pee-Wee! *(Laughing wildly.)* Whoo-hoo-hoo-hoo-ho-hoo-hoo! Great gosh almighty!

Pee-Wee: Oh! Little Richard, are you alright?

Little Richard: *(Voice trembling.)* You know me, Peewee. Always fall down, but I get right back up and try again. If at first you don't succeed, you know what they say. You try and you try and you try.

(A loud thump.)

(Pee-Wee shouts.)

Except ice skating. I give up! I quit.

Jesse Thorn: And Pee-Wee forcing Frankie and Annette Funicello into holiday decoration making indentured servitude.

Clip:

(Playful giggling.)

Pee-Wee: ALRIGHT! I'm gonna have to separate you two! Now, get back to work. I need 500 of each of those by sundown! *(Chortles awkwardly.)*

(A disappointed musical stinger.)

Speaker: 500?!

Jesse Thorn: A call from Oprah.

Clip:

Orpah: Hello?

Pee-Wee: *(Aggressively.)* Hello!

Oprah: Pee-Wee, is this you?

Pee-Wee: WHO WANTS TO KNOW?!

Oprah: This is Oprah Winfrey!

Pee-Wee: Hi!

Oprah: Hi!

Pee-Wee: Hi!

Oprah: I just wanted to say Merry Christmas to you.

Pee-Wee: MERRY CHRISTMAS, OPRAH! I'm gonna have to call you back. I have Dinah Shore on the other line! Heh-heh!

Jesse Thorn: There's even a part where a giant crate gets delivered from the North Pole, and inside is Grace Jones.

Clip:

Grace Jones: Hey, Pee-Wee.

(A dramatic, percussive swell of music that resolves in peaceful harp chords.)

Pee-Wee: Grace Jones!

Grace Jones: Wait a minute. You're not the president. You're Pee-Wee Herman!

Pee-Wee: Duuuuh!

Jesse Thorn: I mean, come on. It's easy to complain about how ridiculous Christmas is. Too commercial, too phony, too religious, not religious enough. But why not just celebrate? The holidays are great! Right in the depths of winter, there's some time where we've all agreed to think about what we're grateful for and do a little something nice for each other. You might as well have a few laughs along the way. So, I say: thanks, Pee-Wee, for 25 years of fun and friendship. Felisnavidad.

Music: "Pee-Wee's Playhouse Christmas Special Theme" from the *Pee-Wee's Playhouse* Christmas special.

Merry Christmas, everybody!

Merry Christmas everyone!

Christmas is here!

This Christmas is magic!

Christmas is here!

This Christmas is magic!

Merry Christmas today!

(Song ends in a signature Pee-Wee Herman giggle.)

Transition: Bright, festive synth.

Jesse Thorn: That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye*, created in the homes of me and the staff of Maximum Fun, as well as at Maximum Fun HQ in the historic jewelry district in downtown Los Angeles, California. Here at home—well, I bit into a potato

chip and broke a piece of my tooth off! (*Chuckles.*) So, I just got a crown in, and my lip is still a little bit numb. I don't know if you can tell. Hopefully not.

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

You can follow *Bullseye* on Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, where you'll find video from just about all our interviews—including the ones you heard this week. And I guess 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.

(Sleigh bells jingling.)

Jesse Thorn: (*Humming the tune to "Carol of the Bells".*) Yeah, we should just put "Sleigh Bells" behind this. (*Chuckles.*)

(ADVERTISEMENT)

[01:20:00]