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Transition: Thumpy synth with a syncopated beat.

Jesse Thorn: For many years, I ended the program with an essay called “The Outshot”.

(Scattered cheers from the audience.)

It was something about something that I appreciated or recommended, and it has been a while. But it has also been a while since I have been on stage in front of you. So, I thought that I would bring that back. Because after 25 years of doing this show, I have been appreciating it. So, this is “The Outshot”.

Radio is made of time, and time is cruel.

(Bright piano music fades in.)

Time is purely linear. There is no going back. It marches forward no matter how much you object. Time doesn't wait for you to catch up. If you make a mistake, it's a mistake made forever. If you have nothing to say, you're left in the dust. In radio, there is nothing more terrifying than filling the time.

When I was in high school, my classmate Susan's dad came in one day. And he was in this thing called Toastmasters. And the idea was he was going to teach us his Toastmaster's secret—that he was gonna teach us all to, I guess, make after-dinner speeches at the Rotary Club?

(Laughter.)

And so, one by one, he put us all in front of the class, and he asked us what we care most about in the world. And he asked me, and I think I said baseball. And then he pulled out a stopwatch, and he said, “Okay, start talking about baseball. You have three minutes. Fill it.” And maybe I was 70 seconds in before I ran outta wind. And I got further in than most. It's hard to fill time. It's scary.

When you're in radio, it's just you and a microphone, and you have to keep talking. As soon as you shut up, you disappear. The audience reaches for the tuning knob. Like, “Is something wrong? Is he dead?”

(Laughter.)

When folks ask me how I started interviewing, the truth that I usually avoid is this: to fill time. My friends Jordan and Gene were the funniest guys I knew. They probably still are. And the three of us used to pile into a college radio studio every Thursday at seven o'clock in the morning, and then we would just stare terrified at that clock. The red light would go on. We'd do a bit that we'd written the night before, and then the clock would say 7:08.

(Laughter.)

We only had to make it to the Pacifica News at eight, but we were already out of wind. So, we started emailing people. We emailed Dick Dale, the king of the surf guitar. Matt Besser from a new TV show called *The Upright Citizens Brigade*. I sent an email to Shelley Berman, the 1960s comedy legend. He emailed me back. They all emailed us back, and then we got them on the phone. Basically, we were saying to them, "Help us fill time. For half an hour, let us put the burden of our airtime onto your shoulders, ask you stuff, and bounce off of you."

When Jordan and Gene moved away, I freaked out. I begged friends to come co-host with me. Al Madrigal, Kathi Goldmark, W Kamau Bell, Nick Adams. Thank you for making the drive to Santa Cruz. Thank you for giving me someone to talk to.

But eventually, I let that fall away. I was sending the emails; I was getting replies. And I found that the time that was being filled wasn't just my hour that I was on the air; it was my day and my week. I was booking and prepping and interviewing and cutting and posting. And I always had this pit in my stomach. How will I fill this time?

(The piano music resolves on a chord.)

And one day—this is maybe like 10 or 15 years ago. I was in my therapist's office, and he was an old-fashioned kind of therapist—the kind of therapist who only asks you questions. And I was telling him about this fear I had of the show every week. The show's coming up. I gotta fill this hour.

"What are you afraid of?" He said to me.

And I was like, "I guess like... not knowing what to say or... looking stupid or embarrassing myself."

“Hmm,” he said.

“But that's good,” I said. I was like, “It keeps me motivated, you know?”

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And he said, “It's good to feel bad?”

(Scattered laughter.)

“I don't know,” I said.

“Let me ask you this,” he said. “Looking stupid, embarrassing yourself on your show. Does that happen? Do you leave the show feeling stupid and embarrassed?”

And I thought about it, and I said, “I guess no.”

And my therapist raised an eyebrow—which was as close as he would come to calling out a breakthrough. (Chuckles.)

(Laughter.)

(Upbeat piano music fades in.)

One time right around then, I was talking to Larry King in his trophy room—like, walls lined with pictures of him with presidents and baseball Hall of Famers, a coffee table literally two full of trophies to put down a glass of water. He was wearing his suspenders. And I told him about this! I told him about feeling scared about filling the time and feeling scared about looking stupid. And he told me that he started in radio doing overnight shifts from a 24-hour diner. And he interviewed all night long whoever walked up to the booth.

(Laughter.)

And sometimes that was Bobby Darin, and Bobby Darin had just finished a show and was getting something to eat. And sometimes it was just a guy driving a tractor trailer. He couldn't fear the time that he had to fill. He didn't have that option, because it basically went on forever. It was six/eight hours of talking to waitresses and cabbies. So, instead of living in his terror, he just stayed in now.

He didn't get scared. He didn't plan. He just lived. He actually told me that the best question he ever asked anyone was of a pilot.

“When you take off, do you know that you're going to land?”

(Laughter.)

Why did he ask this question? Because he didn't know the answer! And because not knowing the answer was fine!

That sealed it. It was enough to be there and be curious and be embarrassed, and then maybe do it again next week. 25 years is 1,300 weeks. So, that is 1,300 times I have filled an hour on the show; 1,300 hours of sitting across from someone and asking them a question, because I do not know the answer. I have had every feeling on the show. Laughed a lot, been excited and scared and inspired, cried a few times. But after 25 years doing it over and over and over again—every time trying to be a little more present, trying to listen a little harder, feel a little more deeply, care a little more? After 25 years, I am here where I am, and I'm filled with gratitude. And I'm not scared of filling the time.

That's my outshot.

(Cheers and applause.)

(Piano music ends.)

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