

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

Promo: *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.

Music: “Huddle Formation” from the album *Thunder, Lightning, Strike* by The Go! Team—a fast, upbeat, peppy song. Music plays as Jesse speaks, then fades out.

Jesse Thorn: It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. What is Devo? It is a band, of course, founded in Akron, Ohio in 1973 by Gerald and Bob Casale, Mark and Bob Mothersbaugh. And if you're around my age, maybe you grew up watching the music video for “Whip It” on VH1.

Music: “Whip It” from the album *Pioneers Who Got Scalped* by Devo.

Shape it up!

Get straight!

Go forward!

Move ahead!

Try to detect it!

It's not too late

To whip it

Whip it good!

When a good time turns around

You must whip it

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: Maybe before the video comes on, a host would call them like nerd rock or something—I guess because they had glasses? Some of them. But Devo isn't nerd rock, whatever that means. Put on a Devo record, you will hear some elements of new wave, power pop, punk rock, art pop. In 1977, David Bowie called Devo the band of the future. Devo is also a concept—a philosophy, really, that humankind is on an inexorable downward slide; and the only real thing that makes sense is to mark that slide with funny outfits, satirical lyrics, and repetitive, almost hypnotic musical arrangements. Like, listen to “Uncontrollable Urge”, the first track from their debut in 1978.

Music: “Uncontrollable Urge” from the album *Pioneers Who Got Scalped* by Devo.

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah-yeah-yeah-yeah-yeah-yeah-yeah!

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah-yeah-yeah-yeah-yeah-yeah-yeah-yeah!

Got an urge, got a surge, and it's out of control

Uncontrollable urge I wanna purge, 'cause I'm losing control

Uncontrollable urge, I wanna tell you all about it

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: And Devo is also coming to an end. Or maybe not. In 2023, they announced their 50th anniversary farewell tour. And it's still going on today in 2026. They're playing Coachella. I was lucky enough to talk with Gerald and Mark from the band back in 2010. At the time, my show was called *The Sound of Young America*. You will hear the guys make reference to that in the interview.

One heads up first: the founders of Devo attended Kent State University, the college where—in 1970—Ohio National Guard troops shot and killed four student protesters. Casale and Mothersbaugh say the massacre was the impetus for them starting the band. We'll talk about that in this conversation, so if you are listening with anyone who might be sensitive to that kind of thing, we wanted to let you know.

Okay, let's get into it. My conversation with Mark Mothersbaugh and Gerald Casale of Devo.

Music: “Beautiful World” from the album *Pioneers Who Got Scalped* by Devo.

It's a beautiful world we live in

A sweet romantic place

Beautiful people everywhere

The way they show they care

Makes me want to say

It's a beautiful world

It's a beautiful world

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: Gerry, Mark, welcome to *The Sound of Young America*. It's great to have you here.

Gerald Casale: We're young at heart.

Jesse Thorn: That's what I like to hear. *(Chuckling.)* That's the kind of enthusiasm—that's the kind of false enthusiasm that I like to hear on this program.

(They laugh.)

You know, Gerry, I want to start with you. I was reading an interview with you, and you were talking about your college days and your early days with Mark. And you described your early college days—you described yourself as a classic hippie. And I wonder what that meant for you, personally. How did that—? What was that for you?

Gerald Casale: *(Casually.)* Oh, pot. Psilocybin. Acid. Sex.

Jesse Thorn: *(Giggles.)* Just a checklist.

Gerald Casale: And lots of— Well, and lots of studying. I was in the honors college, and I did have a high grade point average, so I thought I was allowed to do those other things.

Jesse Thorn: What about you, Mark? Were you onboard for that stuff?

Mark Mothersbaugh: I wasn't really interested in drugs. I was just glad not to be getting my butt kicked one more day in a row at my high school I had been attending

before that. So, I was very happy to be in a college that had—I don't know, it was over 10,000 kids in it, as opposed to being in a school with 80 kids who hated people that liked the Beatles.

Jesse Thorn: (*Laughs.*) Wait, hated people that liked the Beatles?!

Mark Mothersbaugh: That sounds crazy, but it was—

Jesse Thorn: That's a pretty large demographic!

Mark Mothersbaugh: Yeah, it was a Neanderthal-style school system, and country western ruled the day in that neighborhood.

Jesse Thorn: How old were you when the Kent State shootings happened?

Gerald Casale: I was 20.

Jesse Thorn: It's difficult for me to imagine having that kind of experience at that age. I mean, you were actually, physically—you were involved in the protest.

Gerald Casale: Yeah, I was in the middle of it and—you know—hit the ground when they started shooting. And when we all looked up, there were four people dead and nine people wounded. And I got to see what an exit wound looks like coming out of a body in the noonday sun, and that's—you know. That kind of changed me.

Jesse Thorn: Mark, I wonder how that affected you, from your perspective—you know, sort of half a step removed but still very much in the middle of things.

Mark Mothersbaugh: Well, it changed everything at our school. Obviously, they closed the school down. And we were out of there until fall semester. So, it was between May and September. Nothing was— No one was allowed to go to campus. Gerry and I were both in the art department and had been— We'd actually at that

point collaborated on a couple of visual things. And after school closed down, he came over to my place. And we both played instruments and were both kind of in bands. And we started writing music and talking about what we saw going on in the world around us and came to the conclusion that we were observing de-evolution instead of evolution. And it was kind of the beginning of our band.

Jesse Thorn: What were the first things that you did in the sort of collaboration that became the band Devo?

Gerald Casale: We were doing what was really performance art, but there was no label for it at that time. But that's exactly what we were doing. We were wearing masks. We were playing experimental, kind of trance-like pieces of music that—on purpose, we did not make any chord changes, and we'd get into this primitive rhythm. Mark was using a mini-Moog. We were using early homemade electronic drums that his brother Jim made from Roland practice pads. And uh...

Mark Mothersbaugh: Right. There were no such things as electronic drums at the time. And we were trying to create our own vocabulary, musically. Gerry had been in a blues band and was very—you know, like aware of rhythms and very into beats. And I was playing synthesizers and not really interested in the keyboard and trying to figure out what kind of sounds were part of our culture that would be relevant for us to write music together. And so, I was looking for V2 rocket sounds and mortar blasts and things like that. And we got Jim to build these drums for us, and they were very primitive. They were very like early— As a matter of fact, his first set, he took acoustic drums and almost like you would an acoustic guitar, he just put guitar pickups on them and then ran them into wah-wah pedals and echoplexes.

And it was pretty crazy sounding. It was really— It wasn't something that he could control, a lot of the sound. It was very noisy. The band was very experimental sounding.

Gerald Casale: And we frightened people. It was aggressive.

(They chuckle.)

And you know, they were—it was really pissing them off. And the more they got pissed off, the more we were like, you know, *(laughing)* all proud of ourselves. Because the kind of people we were making angry proved to us that we were doing the right thing.

Mark Mothersbaugh: And you know what? We were angry, and we thought people needed to be angry. You know? It was kind of like, “Yeah, good. We knew something had to wake you up.”

Jesse Thorn: When you say that you were doing these things, I'm trying to picture these things in the context of Akron.

(Gerald agrees with a laugh.)

I'm wondering like what gig did you get? Like, how did you—? *(Laughs.)*

Mark Mothersbaugh: Well, I think 1970—

Jesse Thorn: Was there a CBGBs Central in Akron?

Mark Mothersbaugh: No. Not really, back then. It was in 1974. We would tell a club owner—because this is what they wanted to hear—that we played cover tunes.

(They laugh.)

And we would be on stage and somewhere—you know, about three or four songs into it, it'd be like, “Here's another one by Foghat. It's called ‘Mongoloid’.” And about that point, all these—

Gerald Casale: *(Chuckling.)* Hippies.

Mark Mothersbaugh: —unemployed rubber workers and, you know, ex-Vietnam vets that had gone over there to protect the democratic system; and had come back and found out that while they were over there protecting big business, big business had moved out of Akron, Ohio and moved all their tire factories to Malaysia and Brazil. So, they were just kind of wandering around, bumping into each other, not knowing what to do with themselves. And we became a focal point for their hostility on more than one occasion.

(Gerald chuckles.)

Jesse Thorn: You mentioned “Mongoloid”, which you recorded for your first LP, *Are We Not Men?*. Let's hear a bit of it.

Music: “Mongoloid” from the album *Q: Are We Not Men? A: We Are Devo!* by Devo.

Mongoloid, he was a mongoloid

One chromosome too many

Mongoloid, he was a mongoloid

And it determined what he could see

[Chorus]

And he wore a hat

And he had a job

And he brought home the bacon

So that no one knew

[Verse]

He was a mongoloid, mongoloid

His friends were unaware

Mongoloid, he was a mongoloid

Nobody even cared

Mongoloid, he was a mongoloid

One chromosome too many

Mongoloid, he was a mongoloid

And it determined what he could see

(Music continues under the dialogue then fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: We've got even more to get into from my conversation with Gerald Casale and Mark Mothersbaugh of Devo. Keep it locked. It's *Bullseye* for MaximumFun.org and NPR.

Transition: Chiming synth with a syncopated beat.

Music: “(I Can’t Get No) Satisfaction” by the Rolling Stones, as covered by Devo.

(Music plays under the dialogue.)

Jesse Thorn: Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guests are Mark Mothersbaugh and Gerald Casale. They're two of the original founding members of Devo, the rock band that cut hits like “Whip It”, “Beautiful World”, and perhaps the most memorable ever cover of the Rolling Stones' “Satisfaction”. I talked with them back in 2010.

Music:

I can't get no satisfaction

I can't get me no satisfaction

And I try, and I try

And I try, t-t-t-try, try, try

I can't get no

I can't get me no

When I'm riding in my car

And a man comes on the radio

He's telling me more and more

About some useless information

Supposed to fire my imagination

I can't get no

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: When you were doing these things, aesthetics—visual aesthetics is such a huge part of what Devo is.

(Mark agrees.)

Did you have outfits from the beginning?

Mark Mothersbaugh: Yes. Yeah, the first outfits were firemen's work suits. There were these— You know, plenty of uniform shops in Akron, Ohio for every profession. *(Chuckles.)* And there were these gray jumpsuits that the firemen wore when they weren't, you know, in a May Day Parade or something. *(With confusion.)* May Day?! No...

Gerald Casale: Yeah, Memorial Day parade.

(They laugh.)

Jesse Thorn: The firemen *(unclear)*.

Gerald Casale: Yeah, the communist firefighters.

Mark Mothersbaugh: Another continent, but same idea.

Gerald Casale: But we wore the gray jumpsuits, and we modified them a little. And we wore clear plastic masks that we got from a novelty shop.

Mark Mothersbaugh: And we had some sort of blue hard hat that was kind of—

Gerald Casale: Plastic hard hats.

Mark Mothersbaugh: —not a really helpful hard hat. It was more just an indicator.

(Jesse laughs.) It just made you look like you were a worker. It didn't really make you look safe. It didn't make you feel safe.

Jesse Thorn: But it didn't protect you from the beer bottles coming from Foghat fans.

Mark Mothersbaugh: No, no. Not particularly, but they did give us a uniform look, which we were trying for. We wanted to be like five pieces of a machine rather than five individuals.

Gerald Casale: Like, “Look at me! Look at me!” You know.

Jesse Thorn: How did you get out of Akron? What were your first gigs at places where, you know, you could expect like—I guess you would say “cool kids”—to see your show and potentially even like it?

Gerald Casale: Well, we were quite aware of everything going on. You know, Akron, even though it's cultural wasteland on one level; for those who are interested, we knew everything that was going on in New York and Los Angeles and London; and we had the independent record store circuit. And we went to New York, because we had been reading about CBGBs and Max's. And television had been playing there; Patti Smith had been playing there, early Talking Heads.

So, I went all dressed kind of preppy with a little suitcase, and said I was Devo's manager, and booked us into CBGBs and Max's, and we went there in March. All I remember is it was rainy and cold. And we played, and we got a following immediately. And we got asked back.

Jesse Thorn: What was the reaction of these people who were going to see the—you know, the amazing but relatively earnest sounds of Patti Smith and—you know—the next night they go to the same club, and they see the guys in the yellow outfits?

Mark Mothersbaugh: I think they were blown away. And part of it was that we had spent so much time incubating in Akron unseen and unheard that by the time we got there, it was a very articulated concept. As opposed to, you know, watching Patti Smith's band members swap places with Television band members or Talking Head band members. And you know, they saw these bands as they germinated and as they grew and swapped players and figured out what they were about, Devo kind of came out as this full-fledged virus out of some place that— They would say, "Akron, what's Akron?" You know? And um—

Gerald Casale: Yeah, it was a full-frontal assault, and we had to play two sets a night. So, we'd play in the gray fireman jumpsuits first set, then come back and do the yellow suit set, and people started finding out about it and coming to both sets.

(They chuckle warmly.)

Mark Mothersbaugh: We did different shows. We had so many songs by that point that we could do two full sets.

Jesse Thorn: How did you guys see yourself— At this point in the mid-'70s, before you had released your first record—which was '78, if I remember right—how did you see yourselves relative to punk rock, which was sort of the dominant countercultural music of the time and certainly had similar foundations to what you were doing but was coming out in a very different way?

Gerald Casale: Well, we were really punks. You know, we weren't nihilistic, anti-intellectual punks. We were like punk scientists. And that's why the traditional punks, with all their sets of rules, didn't accept us. And for me—at least at first—that was upsetting that these punk bands weren't accepting Devo. And then it was like better, because then we were just Devo forever. Devo was its own thing. And when punkdom waned, it didn't matter to Devo.

Jesse Thorn: I read an interview—gosh, maybe it was with you, Gerry; it may have been with you, Mark—where you talked about a time when someone accused you of being the thinking man's Kiss?

Gerald Casale: *(Chuckling.)* Right.

Jesse Thorn: Which you felt like, “I wish I could have been the thinking man's Kiss.”

Gerald Casale: I think that was Allan Jones for *Melody Maker*. That was his like final put-down, but it's like, god, that would have been great! Because they were hugely successful, you know?

(They laugh.)

That would mean our message was getting out to as many people as their idiotic message was getting out to.

Jesse Thorn: Because your music was so often in part satirical, as it is folded in on itself—you know, you guys at one point recorded a version of “Whip It” for Swiffer that was, I think, “Swiff It”. I may be misremembering that. But as it sort of folds in on itself, (*chuckles*) it's sort of hard to figure out which parts are a marketer trying to drop the satire from a pitch perfect satire and which parts are you guys satirizing the thing that you are actually doing. Which is to say, you know, recording “swiff” instead of “whip.” And you know, like it's sort of—the cat starts chasing its tail, just as I am in asking this question. (*Laughs.*)

Gerald Casale: No, but obviously your instinct is right. Devo was post-modern, again, when there was no term “post-modernism.” We were self-referential, and it did work like that. You can't make fun of Devo, because Devo makes fun of themselves. So, when you see that hideous commercial footage for Swiffer cut to “Whip It”, it's almost like something we wish we could have gotten somebody to do a long time ago (*laughing*) and probably couldn't have talked any woman into it! You know?

Mark Mothersbaugh: Yeah, to us it was art. We saw that and said, “Oh, that could be in MoCA.”

Jesse Thorn: I remember watching that commercial on television. And “Whip It”, which I'm sure everyone listening remembers, is this really spiky, in its own way kind of harsh, but also kind of fun and joyful and goofy.

Gerald Casale: Right. Up.

Jesse Thorn: And the commercial is— It's so profoundly not reflective of any—like, it really is clearly a commercial where they just thought, “Whip it rhymes with swiff it.”

(They laugh.)

Mark Mothersbaugh: Well, to me, I just love the imagery! Once we saw how idiotic it was like a dream come true.

(Jesse laughs.)

Because I mean, when Bruce Connor—a friend of ours—put together a video for “Mongoloid”, he picked some of the best, most amazing-looking, insipid, insane images from '50s television commercials to put along with “Mongoloid”. And he did a really great job. There was some woman on top of a ball of a deodorant roll, where she's stuck to it and she's on her hands and knees. And she's frightened because she's like trying to get unstuck from a ball of deodorant. And this was like somebody making it for you. It couldn't even be better. And honestly, for us, it's like these kinds of projects like Devo 2.0 that we did with Disney, it's— We see it as—

Geralde Casale: Dada. *(Laughs.)*

Mark Mothersbaugh: We see if it attracts people to pay attention to Devo that might not have ever paid attention to Devo, and maybe they—whether they on a conscious level or not pick up on the messages, it still could happen. So, it still could draw them in. So, I like all of that stuff. I like all of Devo coming up, even in absurd situations like that.

Jesse Thorn: Look, we're going to take a break. We'll be back soon with even more from Mark and Gerald of Devo. Stay with us. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

Promo:

Music: Bright, exciting rock.

Speaker: MaxFun Meetup Day is on Thursday, April 23rd. MaxFunsters from all over are getting together to hang out and celebrate their favorite podcasts. Want to go and meet some friends who like similar stuff and care about the same things as you? Head to MaximumFun.org/meetup to see where and when your local meetup is. Don't see one nearby? Host your own and make some new pals! All you need to do is pick a place that can hold a small group. A bar, cafe, park, library, wherever! Then fill out the form at MaximumFun.org/meetup. We'll add you to the page and help get the word out. So, go to MaximumFun.org/meetup and maybe we'll see you on April 23rd.

(Music fades out.)

Transition: Thumpy synth with a syncopated beat.

Jesse Thorn: It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. I'm talking with Gerald Casale and Mark Mothersbaugh, two founding members of the revolutionary rock band Devo.

Music: "Don't Shoot (*I'm a Man*)" from the album *Something for Everybody* by Devo.

I get up every day

It's a miracle, I'm told

Somehow I live to work

So, I hit the road

Squeeze into my hybrid car

Drive as fast as I can

While I scan the rooftops

Yeah, I scan the rooftops!

Don't shoot! (Don't shoot)

I'm a man!

Don't Shoot! I'm a man!

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: Your new album, in a way, is almost self-satirical. You've put it together through a series of focus groups.

(Gerald confirms.)

And you know, we were talking about Kiss earlier, Gerry. And one time I met George Clinton, and he was very insistent that he felt Kiss was just a knockoff of Parliament for White people.

(They laugh.)

And certainly—

Gerald Casale: That's a funny idea.

Jesse Thorn: Yeah. And certainly, if you were to accuse Kiss of anything, it would probably be that they're specifically formulated in that way for mass consumption. Everything about them is designed for maximum, you know, merchandisability and so forth. You guys have seemed to have decided very specifically to do that yourselves on this new record. Right.

Gerald Casale: Well, I mean, models have imploded. No new viable ones have taken their place. We have always commented on the business of music as part of our aesthetic. And today, with music being devalued and nobody wanting to buy it, marketing is everything. Marketing's been everything for a long time, but now it's clear to everybody. Like, we used to get heavily criticized and beaten up in the rock press for having a stage show, having theatrics, having merchandise, having lifestyle things connected beyond the music.

Mark Mothersbaugh: Well, it was a battle just even to get to do films back in the '70s.

Gerald Casale: Yeah. Now it's like you're expected. Now it's like *de rigueur*. It's like anybody that's going to make it—like a Lady Gaga—that all has to be there. And so, all we're doing after *Pioneers Who Got Scalped* is doing what we already did. And that's, to us, a good thing. You can only be shocking once. You can only be way ahead of your time once. Now we're with the times. All these groups that are out that people love that cite us as influences—like Hot Chip and LCD Sound System and The Kills and bands like that—you know, we figured, “(Chuckling.) Well, god, if they can take our stuff and do that, we're certainly allowed to come back and do what we did, because we do it really well.”

Jesse Thorn: The director, David Gordon Green, was on the show a couple months ago, and he made these very sort of auteur-ish indie films early in his career. You know, *George Washington* and so on. And more recently, he's been making these really big comedies that have relatively large budgets to *George Washington*. And part of making them is essentially focus grouping them. They make a cut. They show it to an audience and see what happens. And he talked a little bit about how the process has been—you know, is partly a burden, but also partly kind of revelatory. And I wonder how you guys have experienced this odd process of focus grouping and putting all your songs through online votes and all these other things that you've done as a sort of satirical art project. And I wonder if anything has come out of it that you didn't expect, or maybe even anything that you didn't expect in a positive way.

Gerald Casale: Yeah, I think that's true. It was an experiment that we totally embraced, because what's the one thing Devo never did? Play ball. You know? Hermetically sealed, insular. And this was the one thing we never did, and it was now or never, you know? It was our one chance to try it. And it's— You know what? People are not as stupid as most people in control think they are. (*Chuckles.*) They really aren't. It's great. The feedback we got was great. And we paid attention to it. We did it.

Jesse Thorn: So, give me an example. What kind of feedback have you gotten that you were surprised at how, you know, trenchant or insightful it was?

Gerald Casale: Well, like on the song study, it was interesting what the hierarchy was in the number of votes with over 40,000 participants. Songs that we wouldn't have expected to score high did, and songs that we really liked scored the lowest. (*Laughs.*) So, we went, “Oh. Okay, what is it that they like about that?” You know, and asked questions and paid attention, which is great. And like the blue domes. Now we've switched to blue!

(Jesse laughs.)

Mark Mothersbaugh: Right. We were wearing red all those years and didn't realize—

Jesse Thorn: People wanted blue this whole time?

Mark Mothersbaugh: People wanted blue, yeah.

Jesse Thorn: What is the contemporary 2010 Devo outfit?

Gerald Casale: We have some age-appropriate clothing: reflective silver titanium thread jackets and pants that glow when they're hit by stage lights. And so, they create this beatific effect, like we're holograms or something. And they really are effective in that way.

Jesse Thorn: It must be like living a beautiful dream.

Gerald Casale: Yeah. And then we have matching half-head everybody masks.

Jesse Thorn: Those half head masks remind me a little bit of the episode of *The Twilight Zone*, where everyone is—it's all POV shots, and everyone's reacting like the guy's so horrifying. And then it turns out that— And everyone has a pig face, and it turns out he's got a regular face.

Gerald Casale: Right. Right. I love that one.

Jesse Thorn: *(Laughs.)* Mark, Gerry, thank you so much for taking the time to be on *The Sound of Young America*. It was really great to have you on the show.

Gerald Casale: Okay. And we are young at heart! *(Laughs.)*

Mark Mothersbaugh: It's been wonderful being here.

Jesse Thorn: Mark Mothersbaugh and Gerald Casale from 2010. Devo! They're continuing their tour this spring and summer with stops all over the United States, including their hometown: Akron, Ohio.

Transition: Upbeat, jazzy synth.

Jesse Thorn: That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye*, recorded at the Maximum Fun World Headquarters in the historic Jewelry District of downtown Los Angeles—where it has been like, I don't know, 100 degrees in March for like two weeks. And also, my AC broke. Please stop this, Los Angeles or God or whatever.

Our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer, 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 from Mara Davis. Our interstitial music comes from Dan Wally, also known as DJW. You can find his music at DJWsounds.bandcamp.com. Our theme music, written and recorded by The Go! Team. It's called “Huddle Formation”.

Thanks to The Go! Team. Thanks to their label, Memphis Industries, for providing it to us.

You can follow *Bullseye* on Instagram, Tik Tok, and YouTube, where you will find video from just about all of our interviews—including the ones that you heard this week. And I think that's about it. Just remember, all great radio hosts have a signature sign-off.

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(Music fades out.)