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

**Promo:** *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of [MaximumFun.org](https://www.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 Jessie Thorn. Laura Jane Grace, the frontwoman of the punk band Against Me!, has a new record out. It's her second solo album. It's called *Hole in My Head*. This interview, which we taped in late 2020, came out just after her first solo album—which was called, and it was appropriate for the time, *Stay Alive*. She recorded it about six months after Against Me! kicked off, then abruptly cancelled a big nationwide tour. You were there. You remember 2020. Not like this kind of thing matters so much, but Laura's solo records aren't especially punk. They might be more like the Mountain Goats or Neutral Milk Hotel. It's music from a singer confident enough to let her writing speak for itself. The instruments are sparse with a guitar or two, maybe some drums, and Laura's voice. Powerful, passionate, and vulnerable.

Interviewing Laura Jane Grace is a special guest, my old pal and Against Me! superfan Jordan Morris. Let's kick things off with something from Laura's new record. This song is called “Birds Talk Too”.

**Music:** “Birds Talk Too” from the album *Hole in My Head* by Laura Jane Grace.

*All the birds talk too (Birds talk too)*

*They're out of Champagne Haze at Rookies*

*I've been gone four weeks*

*And I haven't washed out once yet*

*Are your wings rose ringed? (Wings rose ringed)*

(Music fades out.)

**Jordan Morris:** Laura Jane Grace, welcome to *Bullseye*.

**Laura Jane Grace:** Thank you very much for having me.

**Jordan Morris:** So, you got your start playing music in the music scene in Gainesville, Florida—which is kind of a legendary music scene in its own way. Yeah! What's Gainesville like for somebody who's never been there? And why do you think so much good music comes from there?

**Laura Jane Grace:** Well, technically, I started out in Southwest Florida—in Naples, Florida. And there is nooo music scene whatsoever in Naples, Florida.

*(Jordan laughs.)*

And very much so like my early teenage years—you know, once I got into music and once I realized that there was really no place for me in Southwest Florida—very much the thought of getting out of Florida predominated my mindset. And so, you know, if you're at the bottom of Florida, there's only one way to go to get out unless you want to swim, and that is to head north. And so, you know, I moved out of my mom's house when I was 18 years old. I did not go to college. I dropped out of high school my sophomore year. But for most of my friends—you know, once you're turning 18 and it's time to move out, the good majority of my friends were going to college, you know. And for most of my friends, it was either a choice between Tallahassee or Gainesville.

But between the two college towns in Florida, Gainesville has always had just like such a more vibrant music scene happening. It just felt like that's where everything was going on in Florida. And I'm not sure what started it that way, but it definitely like predated me going there. And you know, there was real venues in Gainesville. There was like real record labels, and there were real bands that were national touring acts. And there was—you know, there was like history there connected to music too, even with like—that's where Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers were from. That's—you know, there was—in the punk scene, it was really happening at the time. That's where like Hot Water Music was from, and they were really going off in the time. And then also, you know, the band Less Than Jake—like, they were signed to a major label, real touring bands. So, that's where I wanted to be.

And there was also—you know, in addition to the music scene, there was an activist scene happening there. And I wanted to be a part of that too.

**Jordan Morris:** Do you remember the first time you ever heard punk rock music?

**Laura Jane Grace:** Well, I guess, you know, you could go down the rabbit hole of arguing what is and isn't punk.

*(They laugh.)*

**Jordan Morris:** We'll take that to Reddit.

**Laura Jane Grace:** Right, right. But you know, I guess predating my first auditory experience, I remember specifically being like eight years old in Italy and seeing the band name “The Sex Pistols” spray painted on a wall.

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And knowing that it was a band and knowing that there was something inherently different about what was going on with them and that they were somehow more dangerous than other things that I was listening to. But my overall musical gateway into punk was through other bands that were influenced by punk. And those influences which were demonstrated by them weren't necessarily understood by me. Like for instance, I loved Guns N Roses when I was in the third grade. That was like my first band I really, really, really super connected with. And I started wearing a Sid Vicious like lock and chain collar, because Duff McKagan wore one—not because I knew who Sid Vicious was, you know? So, like—and then years later found out the connection there. So, all of my intro to punk rock came through other bands in those ways.

**Jordan Morris:** I want to talk about, you know, going from seeing music and being a music fan to actually playing it yourself. And I read that one of the first groups that you played with was people from your church youth group. I would love to hear about that experience and what kinds of music you were playing.

**Laura Jane Grace:** When I moved to South Florida, my parents divorced. My father stayed in Italy, and I moved with my mother and my younger brother. We moved to South Florida because my grandmother already lived there as well as my aunt and uncle. And my aunt and uncle attended a Presbyterian church. And so, my mother started bringing my brother and I to the Presbyterian church. We weren't a super religious family. I think really what it comes down to is my mom was like looking for the social aspect of it, trying to meet people in a new place, you know?

So, my mother would go and do whatever the adults were doing, and me and my brother had to be a part of the youth groups. And then in addition to like whatever was going on on Sundays, the youth group there at the Presbyterian Church offered a Wednesday after class youth group, whatever. So, I think—again, you know, my mother had to work late, and she would send me and my brother to youth group. It was right across the street from my middle school. That's where my first group of friends I developed in South Florida were through the youth group. And there was two kids in particular, my friend RJ and my friend Nick—they were brothers, who—RJ played guitar, and Nick was a drummer.

And we just really connected. We were both into the same type of music at the time, specifically like we were hugely influenced by Nirvana and Pearl Jam. And you know, we loved Nirvana and Pearl Jam. And then we also were really into like classic rock bands like Pink Floyd and Led Zeppelin and The Doors and The Grateful Dead. And so, we would talk all the time about starting our own bands. Because like youth group for us was nothing about God or about religion. It was just a chance to hang out for us, to the point where we would get into a lot of trouble. But there was music involved in it too. You know, we were singing in choir, we were playing in bell choir. But we would talk about starting our own bands, and there was a once-a-year talent show.

So, our first submission into the talent show, there was a group of like five or six of us, and we did an acapella version of “Bohemian Rhapsody”.

*(Jordan laughs.)*

Which I'm so thankful there is no videotape evidence of. We were like sitting backwards in chairs with backwards hats on and, you know—

**Jordan Morris:** Was it an homage to *Wayne's World*? Was that the—?

**Laura Jane Grace:** I'm sure it was, yes, because that was right around when *Wayne's World* came out. And that was my introduction to Queen, I'm sure of it. You know? And then the second year, we did—like, at that point, we had actually—RJ and Nick's parents would let us play music out at their house, which was in the Golden Gate Estates, which is kind of like removed from Naples, out in the woods. But they would let us practice there. And so, we had put our band together. And that second talent show, we played like, you know, electric guitars, amplified, drummer. We did a cover of John Lennon's “Imagine”. And then the third year, we did a cover of “Heart Shaped Box”, Nirvana, and that was when they asked us to never play at the talent show again.

**Jordan Morris:** *(Laughs.)* I want to talk about the early days of your band, Against Me!. I read that it started out with just you playing an acoustic guitar. And Against Me! is very punk. But typically, you know, punk rock bands have electrified instruments. What was the reason for starting it out acoustic? Was it an artistic choice or just, you know, amps are expensive?

**Laura Jane Grace:** A little bit of both. You know, after—after that first initial band collapsed, I drifted heavily into punk. And that was in—and you know, my friends RJ and Nick, they kind of stayed in the grunge world. My first punk bands were all very like—let's say like '77 style punk. Very nihilistic, very much about live fast, die young. It was very linear, let's say.

*(Jordan chuckles.)*

And what you would listen to and think, “Oh, that's punk.” And then probably when I was, like—

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I had like a political awakening, let's say, around like 15 or 16 years old, after I got arrested and beat up by the cops. And at that point, I really split and got into like a section of punk rock or a subgenre of punk, like—the anarcho-punk movement. And I got really into the UK peace punk bands and the scene that was happening in Minneapolis, Minnesota at the time. So, bands like—from the UK, like Crass and Omega Tribe, the Mob, Zounds, Poison Girls, really early Chumbawamba, and then specifically also this band called the Apostles. And a lot of those bands had a really hippie sound. Like, they were—they would have slogans like, “Punk is hippie, hippie is punk.” You know. It—there would be a lot of acoustic guitars in it.

And so, prior to that, I had always actually been the bass player in my punk bands. And I was playing in a band at the time called Common Affliction. And we were like a grimecore band, similar again to the Minneapolis scene bands I was listening to like Doom, and Destroy, Code 13, and Civil Disobedience. And so, we were much more like that. And that all felt very reliant on being in a band. And you know, we were young, you know. Like, there was egos. Whatever. Like, and for whatever reason it just wasn't—it wasn't happening that much. And some of us were serious about it being like—I wanted it to be like, “This is the rest of my life.” You know. *(Laughing.)* Like, “I'm going to be in a band—we need to take this on tour. We need to do this.” And other people were—you know, no fault to them or anything, but other people were more about, like, “Let's just play music once a week and see what happens.” You know?

And so, we kind of had like a falling out at some point or whatever. Not that we broke up, but I was like, “I wanna do my own thing. Like, I feel like I just need to like try something else.” And so, without any real intention, it was like—maybe October or something like that, I was like, “By December, I wanna write ten songs on my acoustic guitar, and I want to record them on—” My mother had gotten me like a 4-track cassette tape recorder. “And I wanna record them on a demo and then I'll just dub some copies.” ‘Cause that's how we would distribute music then. We would record it on cassette and then just make copies of the cassette. We'd go to Kinkos. We'd scan copies of like an insert to put in the cassette. And then give them away or whatever.

So, I just, you know, wanted to make like a dozen cassette tapes and then give them out to friends. And so, I did it. And that was the very first Against Me! record.

**Jesse Thorn:** We're going to take a quick break. When we return, even more with Laura Jane Grace. Stay with us. It's *Bullseye* from [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and NPR.

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**Transition:** Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

**Jesse Thorn:** Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. Our guest is Laurie Jane Grace. Grace is the lead singer and frontwoman of the punk band Against Me!. She's also a solo performer. She just released a brand-new album called *Hole in My Head*, which is out now. She's being interviewed by our friend and correspondent Jordan Morris, who talked with her back in 2020.

**Jordan Morris:** The first time somebody played Against Me! for me, there was kind of a legend surrounding the album? Like, I think the spiel I got was like, “You have to hear this band. It's just one person, and they only play in laundromats.”

*(Laura laughs.)*

And I just wanted to ask: is that true? Was there a time when you were just playing laundromats? And if not, if that's just a weird urban legend, do you remember your first shows with Against Me!?

**Laura Jane Grace:** Well, we played one laundromat that started that legend. Maybe we did play subsequent laundromats.

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But it was really this one, legendary laundromat show that that was all born from. But, you know, we really like—we didn't fit in anywhere as a band. And so, starting out in Southwest Florida—as I said, where at first there was no place to play—you know, we would busk on street corners, or we would like—you know, we got really into the activist scene and really into being part of Food Not Bombs and what was called FRAN, the Florida Radical Activist Networks, where a bunch of people who did Food Not Bombs in their different towns would meet up once a month and talk about what we were doing. And then we'd organize things like youth liberation conferences or May Day gatherings.

And so, we'd like go and camp in the middle of the Ocala National Forest for a week. And you know, me and Kevin—who was the original drummer in Against Me!—he would bring his pickle buckets, and I would bring my acoustic guitar, and I saw that as like the advantage too, then, of the acoustic guitar. It was like, oh, we don't need amplifiers. If we can't have a venue to play at, let's just take that a step further and like disown it and be like, “Well, not only are we not going to want to play on a stage, we're not even going to use amps.” And that'll like give us an independence and an ability to adapt, where all these other bands that are existing in south Florida bemoaning the fact that they don't have a venue to play—like, we'll have an edge over them in this way.

But there was a record store in south Florida called Higher Learning that was probably like our first place that we played the most shows at, but it was all very just like the local friends. And then when we moved to Gainesville, we really weren't accepted by the scene there at first at all. And the place that we played at was the Civic Media Center, which was a local nonprofit, volunteer-run, anti-corporate press library and activist space. And so, I started volunteering there. And eventually like they let me start booking shows there even, but that was where Against Me! would play all the time. And we weren't accepted in the bar scene; we weren't even accepted in the house show scene in Gainesville. And it wasn't until a number of years later when we put out a record with No Idea Records, which was like the local label of lore, that that happened.

But our first tours were all, you know, self-booked—specifically leaning on a resource called *Book Your Own (censor beep)ing Life*, which was this zine that just had like a list of phone numbers and a list of addresses for houses or basements or show spaces across America. And I would call them up or write them a letter and send them a tape and be like, “Can we play?” And so, we did two tours like that, where it was like month long tours that, you know, starting out go on the road and there's 30 shows booked. But at the end of it, we've maybe played a dozen each time. And you know, we played anywhere. Anywhere it would have us.

**Jordan Morris:** So, yeah, your first few albums you mentioned came out on indie labels. You mentioned No Idea Records, and you made a few for Phat Records. But then you made a couple of albums with Butch Vig, who produced Nirvana's *Nevermind*. What does someone with that kind of experience bring to the table? And did making records with him feel more big-time in a way that the other records didn't?

**Laura Jane Grace:** Well, we got really, really, really lucky with working with Butch—for a number of reasons. And you know, the record we made prior to *New Wave*, which was our first record with Butch, we made with J. Robbins—who is a great producer in his own right. And that was our first experience with a producer. But the kind of classic way it works when you're in a punk band and you start working with producers is that you'll be like, "I wanna work with a producer." And then you'll get in the studio with a producer, and you will do nothing but battle that producer and refuse to cooperate or do anything they say. You know? 'Cause you're punk and you want your independence.

*(Jordan agrees with a chuckle.)*

You know? You don't want anyone messing with your sound. So, like, Butch immediately just had this ability to kind of disarm all that. And it really like just spoke to him being genuine. You know? Like, when the conversation came up after, okay, we signed to a major label, A&R person brings up, you know, like, "Okay, what producer do you wanna work with?" And there's the immediate list of the biggest names in music that you've ever heard of that you're thinking, like, "Yeah, right. None of these people wanna work with us." And then you get one that does wanna work with you. Like, what could have happened was that one who did wanna work with you could have just totally phoned it in and could have put you through their usual mold of what they do with every band and not really paid that much attention and had a dozen other projects going on at the same time.

But Butch wasn't like that at all. He was all in, there every day at the studio, every day during pre-production. And really, you know, devoted himself to understanding what the band was about, to understanding where our limitations were, where we could be pushed to grow, and to doing it in a way where we were able to hold on to our identity and successfully placed himself as a buffer between us and the record label to protect us.

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Which I will be forever grateful for. And at the same time, also really giving us the chance to learn in the studio—like, this is what this gear does. Like, "Hey! You all signed a major label deal, and you're making a \$1,000,000 record in a studio right now, and you're gonna spend three months here. You should really get something out of this, beyond your record. You should get some experience that you could use for the rest of your life."

And that wasn't necessarily something that was spoken. It wasn't until afterwards that was realized. But I'm so thankful for it.

**Music:** "Stop!" from the album *New Wave* by Against Me!.

*Stop! Take some time to think,*

*Figure out what's important to you*

*You've got to make a serious decision*

*Stop! Take some time to think,*

*Figure out what's important to you*

*Stop! Take some time to think,*

*Figure out what's important to you*

*Stop! Take some time to think,*

*Figure out what's important to you*

*You've got to make a serious decision*

*It could be me up there in stage lights*

*It could be me on the TV in your living room*

*It could be me jet-setting with my band all across the world*

*Appearing live in concert one night only, tickets sold out*

*Stop! Take some time to think,*

*Figure out what's important to you*

*Stop...*

*(Music fades out.)*

**Jordan Morris:** You mentioned having a producer that kind of acts as a buffer between, you know, you and the label. Obviously, you know, the music industry has changed a ton since you've been in it. Do you feel like record labels try and influence music in the same way that they did when you were first starting out?

**Laura Jane Grace:** Ultimately, that was the realization I had that kind of tipped me towards the decision of signing to a major label—was, you know, you're coming up when I came up. You're kind of instilled with this fear of like, "Oh, the major label, they're going to try and

change your sound. You're gonna sign this contract and take this money and then you're selling your soul." But I realized like through the course of the first three Against Me! records, working with indies: a contract doesn't change anything or protect you in any way. Like you know, you can have a contract that guarantees and stipulates complete artistic control and freedom. But when it comes down to it, unless you're gonna enter into like a glass bubble then, when you record that album—like, if you're working with other people, other people are going to want to interject their opinions. They're gonna wanna feel involved too. And it will behoove you to involve them if you want them to work on your record and have it be successful. 'Cause what kind of jerk is like, "You should have no say in anything I'm doing right now. This is all about me, and then you should go out and work and make me a star!" Like, "And we'll make money." Like, that's terrible!

*(Jordan chuckles.)*

That's just a terrible attitude! So, you know, we went through our third album experience where we stayed with our indie. We didn't sign a contract. So, in theory, we have complete creative control. And we made the record we wanted to make and handed it in. And they're like, "We don't like it. We want you to change the track listing. We don't like the artwork. You should make the name bigger on the cover." And they told us their opinions. And there was no contractual reason why we should have to listen to any of those things, but there's the social pressure reason of why you should listen to those things.

And so then, you know—then you have a major label come to you who are like, "We're gonna give you an unfathomable amount of money, and we're gonna give you a contract that actually says you have artistic freedom." And then you just know that you're still going to have those same social pressures of you're choosing to work with somebody. You're choosing to have a work relationship with them, and they're going to interject your opinion. But you know—like, I remember specifically, specifically this moment with our A&R person coming into the studio when we were with Butch. And they're like, "Hey, okay, so—I've got these lyric ideas for you. Something like, 'I'm running, I'm jumping, I'm singing, I'm dancing, I'm running, I'm jumping.'"

And, like, me and the band are sitting there looking in absolute horror at the A&R person telling us this. Like, crumbling inside. You know?

*(Jordan laughs and "wow"s.)*

Like, we're 26 years old. This is like an A&R person in their like late 40s who's super experienced. You know, like—and they have the power of the company behind them. And Butch is just very calmly sitting there and he's like, "Uh-huh. Okay. That's interesting. We'll try that."

*(Jordan laughs.)*

A&R person leaves, and Butch is like, "We're not trying that! That's terrible."

And we're like, "Oh, thank god." You know. But if we would have tried to have said the same—like, if we would have tried to navigate that situation alone, we would have either been young punks and confrontational about it and been like, "(*Censor beep*) you!" Or we would have like—we would have caved to it, and we would have had a record with those lyrics on it. So, that's an example of the buffer. You know?

**Jordan Morris:** (*Laughs.*) I do think you should record, "I'm running, I'm jumping, I'm singing, I'm dancing" for like an EP down the line.

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**Laura Jane Grace:** It's not even an exaggeration. Those were the literal lyrics that they suggested. (*Laughs.*)

**Jordan Morris:** That's insane.

**Laura Jane Grace:** And it was for the song "Born on the FM Waves of the Heart". But anyways.

(*Jordan cackles.*)

**Jesse Thorn:** This is *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. Our guest is singer songwriter, Laura Jane Grace.

**Jordan Morris:** Your album, *Transgender Dysphoria Blues*—I've heard it described as a concept album about a transgendered sex worker. I wanted to talk about this character and just hear from you who they are and why you wanted to write an album about them.

**Laura Jane Grace:** When I was first starting to work on *Transgender Dysphoria Blues*, I started working on it with the band before I came out to the band as being transgender. So, in writing these songs that were very obvious—you know, like having a song that has a chorus of, "Does God bless your transexual heart?"

You know, when you're playing in a band with a bunch of people who are not transgender or queer, there—you know, (*stammering*) I knew that they were gonna be like, "Uh, so, what—what are you talking about, here?" (*Laughs.*) You know?

(*Jordan chuckles.*)

So, I kind of started talking about it in that way to create a front and to try and push it off of me. Of like, "Oh, well this isn't about me. I'm trying to make a concept album, and it's gonna be a story about this sex worker or something like that." And you know, it didn't work in that context. Like, trying to fictionalize it and make a story out of it was—it just felt wrong and it—you know, it caused a missed connection between me and the band. And it wasn't 'til I just came out and said like, "Um, you know, actually this is—this is just about me. I'm transgender, and I'm going to be transitioning."—you know?—that I really like hit the stride

within the album even, or just like personally—of, you know, this is obviously—feels right. Um. So, that was kind of—that was a front. You know?

Music: “True Trans Soul Rebel” from the album *Transgender Dysphoria Blues* by Against Me!.

*All dressed up and nowhere to go*

*Walking the streets all alone*

*Another night you wish that you could forget*

*Making yourself up as you go along*

*Who's gonna take you home tonight?*

*Who's gonna take you home?*

*Who's gonna take you home tonight?*

*Who's gonna take you home?*

*Does God bless your transsexual heart,*

*True trans soul rebel?*

*(Music fades out.)*

**Jordan Morris:** I'm curious about being a publicly trans person in 2020. Is it any different than, you know, when you first decided to come out?

**Laura Jane Grace:** Well, yeah. *(Laughs.)* It's very different than when I first decided to come out. It's strange to think about, too. It's sad to think about, too. Where coming out—and I came out in 2012—at the time, there was like just this undercurrent that I felt of like—it wasn't just like... by myself, I was like, “I'm going to come out. This is what I'm going to do right now.” I really like felt it around me with other people coming out—whether that was, like my friend Mina Caputo. I remember reading about her coming out. And like those little bits of like—it's like a trail you're following. And every time you see someone else come out and accept themselves, it empowers you to accept yourself and be who you are. And it kind

of all—you know—I mean, it was on the cover of *Time Magazine*, like a year or two later, the “transgender tipping point”.

That was a real thing, you know? It was like all this cumulative energy that came together in a way where it was like—it felt like safer. It felt like there was hope, and it felt like—that this—oh, this is realistic. Like, I could come out right now, and I could be—I could be happy. I could just like be accepted in the world and, you know, not ridiculed and just like maybe there’s room for me in society to like have rights. Whereas now, so much of that seems in question and uncertain, and it just seems so much scarier. I mean, even—you know, I look at like—when was it, in 2015 or 2016? Where like the Obama administration, you know, came out, and they were like, “Transgender people, we see you. We recognize you. We have your backs.” Like, that was just a crazy moment to experience. You know? To feel like recognized by your government as legitimate and that you would maybe be protected somehow.

Whereas now, it’s like this worry of like, “Am I going to be able to continue to have access to hormones? Do I need to—how do I approach that?”

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Or like, “When are they going to like totally screw me over with healthcare?” Like, just all these very real fears that—you know, again I feel pretty naïve about, ‘cause these are fears that transgender people or queer people have, you know, dealt with throughout history.

**Jesse Thorn:** We have a bunch more with Laura Jane Grace coming up. After the break, she recorded her first album during the height of the covid-19 lockdown. Learn what that was like and how she got through it. It's *Bullseye* from [MaximumFun.org](https://www.maximumfun.org) and NPR.

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**Promo:**

**Jordan Morris:** Who guests on *Jordan, Jesse, Go!?*

**Jesse Thorn:** I mean, we could just list Patton Oswalt, Kumail Nanjiani, Maria Bamford, whatever.

**Jordan:** We couldn't remember all of them.

**Jesse:** So, we asked my kids.

**Kid 1:** Uuuh, famous people?

**Jesse Thorn:** How famous?

**Kid 1:** I don't know, pretty famous.

**Kid 2:** Uuuh—uuuh, really tiny celebrities who would go on this train wreck instead of like a big talk show. (*Giggles.*)

**Kid 3:** There's just a bunch of people on your show. (*Giggles.*)

**Jesse:** *Jordan, Jesse, Go!*

**Jordan:** A comedy show for grownups.

**Transition:** Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

**Jesse Thorn:** This is *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. Our guest is Laurie Jane Grace. She is both a solo musician and frontwoman of the punk band Against Me!

**Jordan Morris:** There's an Against Me! album called *Shapeshift With Me*, which is a lot of love songs. But they are love songs that involve plane crashes and body horror. I wanted you to talk a little bit more about how Against Me! approaches writing a love song.

**Laura Jane Grace:** You know, I don't know. I guess like at the time, I was kind of obsessed with that idea of just wanting to write love songs. And maybe it was because like in a way I needed to simplify things in my head, and I was tired of thinking of bigger ideas. And also, I was trying to shy away from the pressure of like—you know, the record prior to that was *Transgender Dysphoria Blues*. And I unfortunately, for better or worse—I have this like natural inclination where when something is expected of me I don't want to do it. So, like having a record like *Transgender Dysphoria Blues*, which dealt directly with the transgender experience, to then feel like there was an expectation to follow that up with another record directly about the transgender experience. That rebellious nature in me was just like, “I just want to write love songs.”

(*They laugh.*)

So, that's all I was into doing for a period of time. And also, kind of like realizing that there's just so much music out there that is that. You know, like that's like such a universal topic, but that is not a topic that's like necessarily sung about by transgender people. And transgender people being so historically fetishized and kind of like seen as unlovable in so many ways—like, I wanted to present myself in that way. You know? To examine that feeling from a transgender perspective. You know, of like is the only way a love song will connect on the radio is if it's sung by like a cisgendered person? And why?

**Music:** “333” from the album *Shape Shift with Me* by Against Me!

*Three, three, three, say that they knew me*

*Three, three, three, bring it all back to me*

*All the devils that you don't know*

*Can all come along for the ride*

*I wanna be as close as I can get to you*

*All the devils that you don't know*

*Can all come along for the ride*

*I wanna be as close as I can get to you*

*(Music fades out.)*

**Jordan Morris:** I want to talk a little bit about the new solo record, *Stay Alive*. I read that the songs on this record were not originally written to be a solo record. I wanted to know about the original plans for them and why you decided to record them like this.

**Laura Jane Grace:** Well, I had started off the year thinking that I'd be doing an Against Me! record this year. And you know, I put out a record in 2018, called *Bought to Rot*, on a label here in Chicago—Bloodshot Records—and I spent most of 2018-2019 touring on that.

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And then Against Me! had been playing shows through 2019, too. And we had been—you know, I had been writing songs during that whole time. And we had been working on them. And then, start of this year, we spent a week together in the studio in January. A week together in the studio in February. A week together in the studio in March. I played the Bernie Sanders rally in Lansing, Michigan. And then we headed out on what was supposed to be a three-week-long tour. We got three days into the tour, and we had to cancel. We had to go home.

That was when the pandemic hit. So, it became really clear once we all got home—and none of us—you know, none of us live in the same city. None of us live in the same state. So, it became really clear once we were home that, you know, tour by tour we were having to cancel the year, and all of our plans were falling apart, and that there was no real way to continue on working on a record. 'Cause we just couldn't get into a room. So, at the time—you know, I had like a good 30/35 songs. And we still weren't in a place where it was like, "Alright, we're ready to record. We know what the record is." We were still writing and working on it. So, it's not like—you know—that these exact 14 songs just would've been the exact Against Me! record. It's very realistic there would have been one or two songs maybe on that, and the rest of them would've been totally different songs. Or you know, even newly written, or of the other 15+ that I still have that I'm sitting on. You know?

But with this being kind of open-ended and not knowing, like, "Okay, so are we gonna get together again in a year? Or two years?" And if it's like two years, is it gonna be like, "Hey.

Hey, everybody. Remember those 35 songs that we were working on two years ago that we weren't really gelling with, but—hey, let's jump right back into those." Right? Like, that didn't seem like it was gonna be anything anybody wanted to do. And I took a look at the songs that I had, and I just was like, "You know what? I think there's just like a record here already." And specifically, also, with choosing the songs I did, it was like—you know, there's some songs here that maybe they weren't working in the full band context, but I like them! They make me happy. They make me happy to sit in my bathroom—it has the best acoustics in my apartment—to sit in my bathroom and to play them on my acoustic guitar and to sing them. I like them.

So, in almost a selfish way in that sense, I was just like, "I just wanna record them. I wanna record an album, because it'll give me something to do. And it feels productive, and it feels right to be productive." All I'm doing every day is waking up, turning on the news and seeing reports, you know, of job loss. Of people being unable to pay their rent. I'm hearing from my friends about venues closing down, about the music industry just in total collapse. So, the idea of like, "Okay, yeah, on the one side, I am a touring musician. That's what I do. But on the other side, like I'm also a songwriter, and I'm a recording musician. And I can't tour right now, but I can record. I can continue to write songs." So, if I can do that, and all I have to do, in order to do that is to adjust my parameters—adjust my scope—and realize my limitations of: I can't do it with my band, 'cause they're not here. I have to do it in Chicago, 'cause that's where I live. I can only play and sing guitar. That's all I can do. So, I can still make a record like that. So, I just did that and I—you know, and I booked time.

**Music:** "Old Friend (*Stay Alive*)" from the album *Stay Alive* by Laura Jane Grace.

*Don't make any promises*

*Old friend, I'm losing my mind*

*Watching the days burn into years*

*Watching the years burn dry*

*Please stay alive*

*Please stay alive*

*Please stay alive*

*Please survive*

*(Music fades out.)*

**Jordan Morris:** I want to finish our conversation by talking about the last song on the new record. It's where the title comes from. It's called "Old Friend (*Stay Alive*)". And I don't know. This is just a really beautiful song that I've been playing around my house a lot the past

couple weeks, and I just kind of wanted to hear about it. Where did it come from, and why is that phrase—“stay alive”—something you wanted to put on the cover of the album?

**Laura Jane Grace:** This is actually the very first song out of any of the songs on the record that was written. And I wrote this song probably end of 2017, beginning of 2018. And I have my friend, Patrick, who's an old friend from Gainesville. You know, Patrick played in bands for years that Against Me! toured with, and we were both friends in Gainesville. And then we both moved away from Gainesville, and I fell out of touch with him for a number of years. But at the time, I had gotten back into contact with him, and we just kind of—we would text every day and just talk about what was going on. They were like living in a really isolated place.

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I was really isolated-feeling at least, emotionally. And we were identifying with each other. And it was stark to me, feeling the years between us, feeling the way things had changed, being able to like really directly feel like still a connection to like, “Hey, remember that tour we took in July of 2001 or '02, and it was a summer tour. And you know, I can remember your jean shorts, and I can remember the feeling of swimming in a stream in Montana. I can remember, you know, jumping on the roof of the vans when we were stuck in traffic in Iowa. I can remember trying to get over this one pass in the Rocky Mountains. Like, all of just like these really direct memories and then feeling that gulf of time between us and not understanding how far—how we had drifted so far away from the people that we used to be, or how things had changed in just the ways they had changed, or the people that were close between us who we had lost along the way.

And ultimately, like when I boiled all the emotions down, there was just that feeling of like I just want them to stay alive. Like, you know, I know that they may be having a hard time, and maybe that's even selfish. But like, if you stay alive, then I'll stay alive. You know? Like, and I just want you to stay alive. I want you to selfishly stay alive, even if it doesn't have anything to do—even if who we are now doesn't have anything to do with who we were, just because of that connection to it. You know?

And that was the feeling behind writing the song at the time. And then as—you know, as the years progressed and as we got to where we are now, it just like resonated more and more of in wanting to kind of like boil down the simplest message—you know, just like what is the most important thing right now? You know, and you kind of like would hear about that even more so at the start of the pandemic of like, you know, “Go easy on yourself if you're not accomplishing that much right now. You know, what's important is—” like that type of line of thinking. And all that's important is like just stay alive. Just stay alive. You can kind of screw things up right now, whatever. That's fine. Just stay alive. You know, maybe you're not being as productive as you could. Just stay alive.

**Jordan Morris:** Well, Laura Jane Grace, thank you so much for this great conversation and for being perhaps the first person ever to mention Less Than Jake on NPR. I thank you for both those things.

**Laura Jane Grace:** *(Laughs.)* My pleasure. I like to break new ground.

**Jesse Thorn:** Laura Jane Grace. Her new album is called *Hole in My Head*. It's out now. Thanks to my cohost and old pal Jordan Morris for interviewing Laura. And while I am at it, I want to mention Jordan has a new podcast! It is called *Free With Ads*. Jordan is one of the funniest dudes in the world. And on the show, he and Emily Fleming—who's also a very brilliant and hilarious comedian—recap a movie that you can watch for free right now on YouTube or Tubi or IMDB TV or one of those weird Roku apps that's free that's called like Superman Cartoons Right Now. All movies that you can watch for free on those services, but only if you sit through like an auto insurance commercial or two. It's basically—look, it's a podcast about all of the wonderful things that the internet gives us for free and some of the less wonderful things. Again, *Free With Ads*. It's really funny. Go listen to Jordan and Emily. They're the best.

**Transition:** Chiming synth with light vocalizations.

**Jesse Thorn:** That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye* is created from the homes of me and the staff of Maximum Fun, in and around greater Los Angeles, California. Here at my house, I've been working on loose-leash walking with my new dog, Junior.

Our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producer is Jesus Ambrosio and Richard Robey. Our production fellow at Maximum Fun is Daniel Huecias. We get booking help from Mara Davis. Our interstitial music is by Dan Wally, DJW. Our theme song is called “Huddle Formation”. It was written and recorded by the great band The Go! Team. Our thanks to The Go! Team. Our thanks to their label, Memphis Industries. Go check out their records. They're great.

*Bullseye* is on Instagram, where we share interview highlights, behind the scenes looks, all sorts of other stuff. We're [@BullseyeWithJesseThorn](#) there. We're also on Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook. And I think that's about it. Just remember, all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

**Promo:** *Bullseye* with Jesse Thorn is a production of [MaximumFun.org](#) and is distributed by NPR.

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