

Transom Review: Jesse Thorn

Volume 12 / Issue 1

Make Your Thing: 12 Point Program for Absolutely, Positively 1000% No-Fail
Guaranteed Success

April 2012

(Edited by Sydney Lewis)



Jesse Thorn

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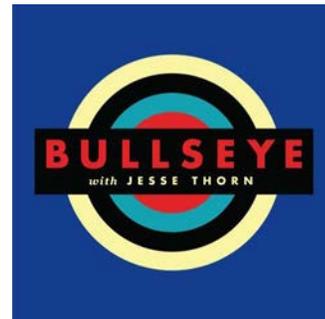
The commercial world guards its secrets. The game is competitive and money is the prize. The non-profit world, when it is functioning the way it should, upholds a spirit of generosity and common good. The two cultures tend not to mix very well, but Jesse Thorn ("The Sound of Young America," now "Bullseye") has brought to Transom a big-hearted and wise Manifesto in which he tells you how to make good things and, more surprisingly, how to make money at it. He could have kept the secrets to himself. Instead, he wrote "Make Your Thing: 12 Point Program for Absolutely, Positively 1000% No-Fail Guaranteed Success" with fascinating parables from comedy, hip-hop, blogging, cartooning and more. Jesse's own experience stretches across all sorts of independent media and performance. His words are practical and inspirational, and funny. They'll help you do better work. Jesse is donating his secrets in the best non-profit tradition.

Make Your Thing: 12 Point Program for Absolutely, Positively 1000% No-Fail Guaranteed Success

For the past two years or so, I've been crisscrossing the country, delivering an award-winning talk called Make Your Thing. (I should note that it has not won any awards, and while I have done it on both sides of the country, and once in Canada, crisscrossing is probably a little strong, too.) It's an attempt to share a bit of what I've learned so far in my career.

When folks started asking me if I was interested in speaking engagements, I started trying to think about what I'm really an expert at, what I could actually offer people insight on from the stage. I think I'm a good interviewer, but that's a pretty specialized skill. Not a lot of market for speeches on "how to interview people for a public radio show." I'm also pretty good at dick jokes, but in the high-class world of educational speaking, dick jokes are more of a seasoning than an entree. It took me a while to realize that there is one other thing that I can actually offer some valuable perspective on, and that's making independent media. Making it, and making it your job.

I started *The Sound of Young America*
[now *Bullseye*
(<http://www.maximumfun.org/shows/bullseye>)] more than ten years ago. I'm 30 now, and I was 19, then. It was my college radio show – that's why the old name was so dumb. We wrote comedy bits and eventually, when we figured out how much easier it was to book a guest than to write 30 minutes of comedy, we did interviews.



When my co-hosts graduated from school, I kept doing the show. At the time, I was driving from San Francisco (where I grew up and lived after college) to Santa Cruz (where I went to school and where the station was) in my mom's car. I kept doing the show out of inertia, frankly. I'd been doing it by then for four years, and I wasn't up much else. I applied for many jobs in commercial and public radio, and got none of them. I was working part-time as an admin at the tiny NGO my father ran. We were a horrible, horrible team.

In 2004, a year or so after I graduated from school podcasting was invented. I'm not much of a tech guy, but I decided that if I could get more than fifty or so people to listen to the show on their computers, it would be worth figuring out how podcasting worked and doing the extra couple of hours a week of work. Again: I wasn't up to much. Things grew well – from dozens of listeners to hundreds. Then iTunes launched podcasting support in 2005, and the listenership grew to a few thousand.

At that point, I was committed to the future of my show, but I still assumed that if I managed to make a living at it, it would be on the radio. Sometime around then, a board member of KUSP in Santa Cruz (<http://www.kusp.org/>) heard my show on the college radio station, and recommended it to the program director, Terry Green. Moving from college radio to a real public radio station didn't mean any significant money, but it did mean I could send an MP3 to the station, instead of driving down and operating the board myself. By then I had a car, a '65 Dart, that I sold to a nice dad and his teenage son, and used the money to buy enough equipment (a mic, a mixer and a phone hybrid) to record from my apartment. I kept doing the show – by this point, I was about 26 and had been doing it for seven years. I worked 25 hours a week at a non-profit in San Francisco as a paid intern.

Around that time, I heard from WNYC (<http://www.wnyc.org/>). Their program director, Chris Bannon, had heard about my show from a guest [John Hodgman, who's now also my colleague on the Judge John Hodgman podcast (<http://www.maximumfun.org/shows/judge-john-hodgman>)]. They picked up a couple episodes. PRI's Mike Arnold heard about the show similarly happenstantially – he saw it in iTunes or something like that. He said they'd be interested in the show (that took an excruciating year, but that's another story). The end result: I was on WNYC, one of the biggest public radio stations in the country, and I was about to sign up with Public Radio International. (<http://www.pri.org/>) At 26, I was the youngest national public radio host in the history of the medium. I was all set. Except that I wasn't.

WNYC and WHYY (<http://www.whyy.org/>) in Philadelphia picked up the show right away, as did a few other significant stations. I found out quickly, though, that that would net me about \$10,000 a year in revenue. For a weekly, hour-long show, which at the time I was producing, hosting, booking and editing myself.

That was less than I'd been making as a part-time paid intern, working in the lucrative field of public parks advocacy.

I loved (and love) public radio, but I realized then that it wasn't actually going to pay my bills. So I started working on a new plan.

It took a few years, but now I make a good living from my show. I've got three full-time employees, and two interns. I also pay thousands of dollars a month to several teams of producer/hosts whose wonderful shows I've helped monetize. I'm not rich or anything, but when my wife had a baby a couple of months ago, I didn't have to be all freaked out about it. Well, I was freaked out about it, but not so much about the money part. My business is stable, and maybe even thriving, despite the reticence of many parts our industry to embrace my show. I still love public radio, and am immensely proud to be part of it, but it's a great relief not to have to rely on it to pay my bills.

[Just ask Luke Burbank, (<http://mynorthwest.com/?nid=93>) or Faith Salie, (<http://faithsalie.com/>) or Bob Edwards. (<http://www.bobedwardsradio.com/bob-edwards-weekend/>)]

But here's where you start asking a very pertinent question: *JESSE, HOW DID YOU DO IT?*

I achieved all of this through something I like to call my 12 Point Program for Absolutely, Positively 1000% No-Fail Guaranteed Success.

Whether you want to build a show like mine, build your own media empire, or simply re-grow up to 50% of the hair you've lost due to male pattern baldness (especially at the temples and crown), my program is for you.

Here it is.

One side note: many of the people I'm about to tell you about are geeks, many are white, and many are male. This is mostly because emerging technology has enabled the techniques they use, and the world of emerging technology is dominated by those demographic categories. If you don't fit into those categories, though, I hope you won't assume that demographics disqualify you. In fact, the opposite is true. A lot of the folks I write about in this piece grew their careers in categories that at the time were expanding, but now are mature and stable. In other words: they got in on the ground floor, and that elevator already left.

It's still entirely possible to build businesses in those categories, but it's tougher.

If you're a woman, or black, or gay, or older, not only do you enter the marketplace with an already-distinctive offering, you may also have a wide-open landscape in front of you. There are a thousand podcasts for 25-year-old white geeks, but very few for 18-year-old hip-hop fans, for example. You have an opportunity to tear open a new category. Go forth and kick ass.

Anyway...like I said: here it is: My 12 Point Program for Absolutely, Positively 1000% No-Fail Guaranteed Success. Featuring some of the brightest lights in the media-making world. And others who just happen to be friends of mine who came into my head while I was trying to think of examples.

1. Start Now (Kate Beaton)

You will never accomplish anything unless you start making stuff now.

Plans are great, but making stuff is how you build an audience, get better, and most importantly, get closer to making a living.

Kate Beaton

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kate_Beaton) grew up in Cape Breton, in Nova Scotia. Despite the fact that she was born in 1983, she didn't have internet access until she went away to college, and even then, she wasn't that into it.

She was working at a maritime museum when colleagues noticed that she was doodling in a notebook. One of them was a comic writer, who convinced her to make a concerted effort, build a website, and regularly share them. These things had genuinely never occurred to Kate.

Kate wasn't a technical person, so she started by making a few jokey comics about history and posting them on Livejournal. People liked them, and she found some help to build a dedicated site. While working at the museum, she started writing and posting the comics more regularly.

In the space of two years, her comic, called "Hark, A Vagrant," (<http://harkavagrant.com/>) became one of the most popular on the internet, and a full-time career.



by Kate Beaton

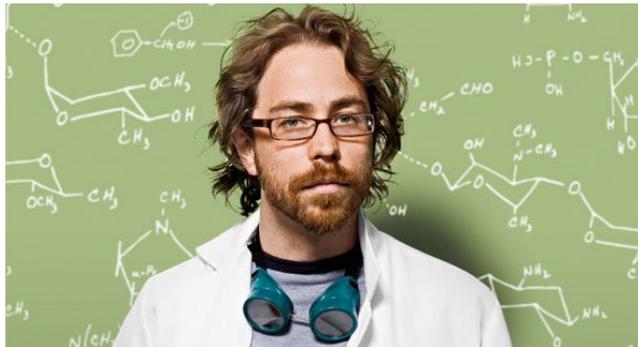
It took her some time to find the right tone. She got a sense of what people responded to. She even asked for topic suggestions from her audience on LiveJournal. (<http://www.livejournal.com/>) Most important, though, was that she started. She actually made stuff, regularly. Not just a one-off thing. She started, refined, got better, and made more of what made sense to make more of. And she quit her job at the maritime museum.

I hear from so many people who have a great idea. The difference between the successful ones and the unsuccessful ones is that the successful ones do it, then do it again and again.

2. Make Deadlines (Jonathan Coulton)

You can't afford to be too precious about your work. Caring is important, but preciousness is the opposite of making stuff. There is no room on the internet for Special Snowflakes who want to procrastinate all day and then drink themselves to sleep and dream about their unwritten novel. To build an audience, you have to be consistently good and often surprising.

An anecdote: my friend Jonathan Coulton was in his mid-30s. He'd been working at a software company since he graduated from college (with a humanities degree), and he was in charge of a team of programmers. It was a great job, and his wife was pregnant with their first child.



Jonathan Coulton

That's the place in your life where you usually put away your dreams, right? Because stability is more important than blah blah blah. But Jonathan did the opposite. He's the most thoughtful, reasonable man in the world, but when he thought and reasoned, he decided that if he didn't at least take a genuine swing at being an artist, he'd be a lousy role model to his daughter. So he quit.

He started a project called Thing A Week.

(<http://www.jonathancoulton.com/primer/thing-a-week/>) He wrote and recorded a song every week for a year. It was brutally difficult for him. A few times, he recorded dumb covers out of desperation. Jonathan's a talented guy, none of the songs stunk, but some were slighter than others (one called "Mr. Fancypants" (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fSVLlwmrPXE&feature=related>) being a prime example of this category).

Some, like the beautiful ballad “You Ruined Everything,” (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f-8hrKb8SAQ>) about his daughter, are anything but slight.

In the process of putting out this work every week, in a remarkable new way, he found fans. Some of the songs went viral, with the help of fan-made videos. Today, Jonathan earns an income that far outstrips what he earned in his Good Real Job, and despite what some may suggest, it was a brilliant (and in many ways replicable) plan, not a fluke. Jonathan backed himself into a corner, and found that he became a success.

3. Keep Your Legs Moving (Killer Mike)

This being a public radio website, I’m guessing there are might be more fans of The Avett Brothers (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qqZZIL0l5Uk>) reading this than “It’s OK.” (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rHesxMIld60>) Even though just typing the names of those things makes me really want to. Anyhoo, let’s talk about Killer Mike.

Even a casual hip-hop fan might remember the Outkast hit “The Whole World.”

(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p5UJjQt3bkM>) It was the single from their greatest hits record, the one that came out right after they went from famous hip-hop group to hip-hop group your parents have heard of. It featured a guest verse from a talented protégé named Killer Mike. I might even say that the young buck outshined his mentors. He ripped it.

It was the perfect time to be Outkast’s protégé: they were the biggest act in hip-hop, and Killer Mike was set up for success. He signed a major label deal and put out a single with a guest verse from Big Boi. A single, which flopped. And an album, which flopped.



Killer Mike

And that left Killer Mike at a crossroads. His mentors were set for life. It was well within his power to become what in hip-hop is called a “weed carrier.” This is the guy who acts as a hype man at concerts, maybe gets a couple solo tracks or an opening set, and depending on the ritzy-ness of the situation may literally be in charge of holding the drugs so the stars don’t have to worry about getting busted. It’s a good job. There’s a guy called Spliff Star who’s been doing this for Busta Rhymes for 15 years now – I bet that guy’s house has more bathrooms than my house has rooms, overall.

Instead of doing that, though, Killer Mike essentially doubled down. When he got dropped from his major label deal, he didn't just sign an indie deal he took his advance money from the major and started a record company. He signed a crew of MCs who weren't just his boys from the neighborhood – he actually listened to demos and signed the most talented dudes he could find.

He named the company (and the crew) Grind Time Rap Gang, (<http://www.myspace.com/grindtimeonline>) because he felt so strongly that the most important thing he could do when faced with adversity was to stay on his grind.

In his music, Mike raps a lot about what he learned from growing up with a mother who was a crack dealer. The essential lesson seems to be that there is no such thing as an insurmountable adversity.

When you have children to feed, you have to find a way to feed them.

4. Don't Confuse Content & Medium (Boing Boing)

As I write this, I'm sitting on an airplane, and across the aisle from me, a passenger is watching Boing Boing TV (<http://boingboing.net/>) on their seatback monitor.

If you're not familiar with Boing Boing, it's probably best known as a pioneering blog, with the motto "a directory of wonderful things." It covers a particular kind of openhearted, creative geek culture that I recognize from growing up in San Francisco in the 80s and 90s. It's the epicenter of old-school blog world, but it was not always so.

In fact, the blog started as a print zine, long before the web. Editor Mark Frauenfelder (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mark_Frauenfelder) is a geek, but wasn't enough of a geek to have registered boingboing.com in the early days of the web, so he had to settle for boingboing.net, and he had a placeholder site there for quite some time before he heard about blogging. The appeal of blogging for Mark was essentially that it was so non-technical – he could write new stuff and publish it without coding. Mark was sharp enough to recognize right at the start that rather than simply putting his zine content online, he should be writing web content that reflected the spirit of his zine content. When he did that, the natural distribution of the web and Mark's great eye for links made his site a monstrous success.



Once he started blogging, he couldn't stop, and soon the site was successful enough that he hired co-editors, including a startup refugee named Xeni Jardin. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Xeni_Jardin) Xeni's done some public radio work – she was a tech correspondent on *Day to Day*, and is a regular on the Madeline Brand show (<http://www.scpr.org/programs/madeleine-brand/>) on KPCC in LA – and she's on cable news all the time. She's been offered big deals to do regular TV work, but she's deeply committed to the independent, geeky ideal of Boing Boing, so when web video became, you know, a thing, she created Boing Boing TV. BBTV is a sort of video version of the blog – a curated world of cool, geeky, smart, creative stuff.

The story of Boing Boing is about the recognition that in the digital world, it pays to be medium-agnostic. That doesn't necessarily mean you should pursue every medium – different people have different skills, and different brands are suited to different media. What it does mean is that you shouldn't think of yourself as a writer or as a radio producer any more than Mark thought of himself as a zine editor or Xeni thought of herself as a blogger. Rather than defining yourself by the medium you create, define yourself by what you offer to your audience. In Mark and Xeni's case, they are curators of fun, creative geeky stuff.

They have allowed their interests and talents to define their subject matter and their subject matter to define their media – and vice-versa. Xeni's great on camera, so it's natural she should curate on-camera. Boing-Boing on the web is about links. In Zine form it was about stories, on camera it's about sharing videos. The form is different, the content is different, but the brand and the soul are the same.

5. Be Authentic (Andrew WK)

This is another music industry failure turned success story. It turns out that the old record industry model had a few big winners and a lot of big losers. Who knew?

Andrew WK (nee Wilkes-Krier) recorded his first EP, "Girl's Own Juice," (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=89yDMSZtHgM>) in his apartment in Ann Arbor, Michigan. It was epic, melodic rock with sometimes as many as a hundred guitar tracks on a single song. It was so epic, in fact, that I remember reading a review of it in the AV Club – as I recall they wrote that they weren't sure whether it was a joke or not, but it was pretty great either way. Andrew moved to New York, and started performing songs from the EP in solo concerts. He would set up a karaoke machine in an art gallery, put in a cassette of his songs, minus the vocals, and then dance and scream until he was literally covered in blood.



Andrew WK

He signed a major label record contract, and while his first single, “Party Hard,” (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WccfbPQNMbg>) was a hit, it still completely baffled audiences. The cool kids were sure it was some kind of Limp Bizkit lunkhead bullshit, or maybe an ironic joke. The lunkheads didn’t understand why he wasn’t wearing a backwards baseball hat or singing about pussy. The punk rockers liked his intensity, but didn’t understand why he seemed so happy all the time. Also: why was he in that Kit-Kat commercial? (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=02AfiASP6yw>) (Actual answer: he genuinely loves snacks and snacking.)

After his label couldn’t find another hit, they dropped him. Another one-hit wonder, destined to become an ad executive back in Ann Arbor on the strength of stories about the time Spike Jonze made a video for his song from the soundtrack of Jackass 2.

Except that it didn’t work that way. Because the remarkable thing about Andrew WK is that Andrew WK is the most authentic man in the world. Everything that is absurd about Andrew is a genuine expression of who he is. He really feels about partying the way that a Japanese calligrapher feels about lettering: that it is a human manifestation of the divine, a metaphor for the fulfillingness of life. Which is why after a two-hour show of songs about partying, he will spend three or four hours talking to fans about their lives until the manager of a concert venue literally forces him to stop.

So when Andrew got dropped from his label, he didn’t have to try to decide whether he was “on-brand.” His brand was a real expression of a powerful passion. He just found new ways to express that passion, whether it was an album of piano improvisations or a Japan-only album of Korean pop music covers. Or a monstrously successful nightclub in New York City (He co-owns one – the Santos Party Haus.) Or a motivational speaking tour. Or a job hosting a Cartoon Network kids’ game show called Destroy Build Destroy, (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WcxkGMPAnbg>) in which teams of 11-year-olds explode something with a bomb, then build something out of the wreckage, then explode what they built. (It is awesome.)

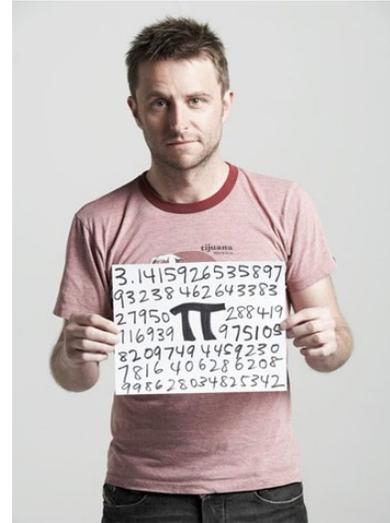
Ultimately, where the record label and even the general public only saw a mook-rocker or a punker or a brain-dead party rocker, Andrew knew who he was. When his career took a detour, he just had to follow his passion. Eventually, the money caught up.

6. Follow Your Passion (Chris Hardwick)

My friend Chris Hardwick was at UCLA when he auditioned to be on MTV. I don’t think he expected to actually get on MTV, but as it turned out, he did. And then all of a sudden, he wasn’t a college student any more. All of a sudden he was at the helm of a cultural phenomenon.

Chris is a little more than five years older than me, so when he was in his early 20s, I was in MTV's prime demographic, and if you're not exactly my age, you might not even remember how important Singled Out (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Singled_Out) was. But trust me: it was. Jenny McCarthy was the star, but Chris was the host. Of course, MTV has never been known for its generous compensation packages, and Chris couldn't even afford a studio apartment on his MTV money, so he had to work an overnight radio shift to pay his bills.

When Singled Out ended, Chris got offered the hosting job on a syndicated dating show called Shipmates, which was like that other syndicated dating show Singled Out, but on a boat. He turned it down and turned it down until they offered him so much money that it seemed irresponsible to turn it down, but if you've ever seen an E! True Hollywood Story, you know that money doesn't buy happiness, especially if you're unexpectedly successful and artistically unfulfilled, so Chris was really a mess. He ended up financially successful, but depressed and drinking too much. If you ever see Shipmates, you can kind of tell.



Chris Hardwick

Doing comedy with his best friend from college Mike Phirman helped get him out of his depression. They were writing funny songs, performing as Hard N Phirm, (<http://hardnphirm.wordpress.com/>) and doing standup sets at an alternative show in Los Angeles called Comedy Death Ray. The songs they were writing were getting nerdier and nerdier. One week, they wrote an entire stage musical based on the movie Tron. It killed.

Maybe it was when they wrote a love song to pi (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mfr7xG6smhU>) that Chris realized that at the heart of his discontent was that his work had been, for his whole adult life, defined by others. Because he had blundered into this cultural phenomenon as a 19-year-old, he was tremendously successful in Hollywood terms, but nothing that he'd done, save what he was doing on stage, was in any way an expression of him. He had a great passion for neither ships nor mates.

The reality was that while Chris had defined himself on TV as a handsome wisecracker, he was actually a nerd. In high school, he had been in the chess club, the Latin club *and* the computer club. So he decided to dedicate himself to exploring that, on stage and screen.

If you don't know, five years later, Chris hosts two television shows, has a million and a half twitter followers, and an entire podcast network build around his Nerdist brand.

Because people can tell – that’s who he really is. And because it is passion that drives audiences today. Not something-slightly-above-disinterest, but PASSION.

7. Focus on Great Work (Merlin Mann)

A word of warning: depending on how smart and talented you are, this one may actually make you less successful. Financially. It will undoubtedly make you more successful at not hating yourself and your life, though. And more successful at making the world suck less. I’d make it optional, but since you’re getting the rest of these insights free, and with great power comes great responsibility, I’m making it mandatory.

My friend Merlin Mann was an itinerant tech geek when he started his website 43 Folders.

<http://www.43folders.com/about> The site was initially dedicated to a personal productivity system called Getting Things Done. The system involves writing down what you need to do on index cards, and filing them in folders – one for each day of the month, and one for each month of the year. 43, in total.



Merlin Mann

Merlin’s a gifted writer, and a very funny man, and his site quickly got huge. Geeks love to look at every problem facing them as an opportunity to find a solution, and the only thing they love more than systems are tips & tricks. Merlin was great at that stuff, and he was a bit of a self-satirist, as well. He advocated getting rid of your gadgets, and just carrying some 3×5 cards held together with a binder clip, which he dubbed “The Hipster PDA.” It was fun, and funny, and self-aware and helpful to a lot of people.

As his site grew in popularity, he found himself throwing more and more coal on the fire. Something started getting distorted. Competitors like Lifehacker (owned by blogging’s Evil Empire, Gawker Media) were ditching the self-satire and the writing and focusing on tips & tricks (“10 Most Productive Pencil-Sharpener”) and doing huge traffic. Eventually, Merlin started to wonder whether he was feeding the flames of his blog with coal or manure.

Then, he quit.

Not altogether, mind you. But he quit making bullshit.

Merlin decided that if he was going to be a writer, he'd write. Even if that meant writing something every couple weeks rather than every day. Even if it meant hurting the traffic on his site and the advertising revenue that came with that traffic. He decided he'd write a big piece on the blog that would really make a difference once in a while, and do some other stuff with the rest of his time.

Which was gutsy as hell.

These days, Merlin's finishing his first book, and he speaks regularly for big bucks.

I'm not sure that this was the best career move for Merlin. I know he's smart enough that he could have kept shoveling cow patties into the furnace and kept cashing ad network checks. I also know that that would have made his life miserable, and his work worse. He might well have flamed out, and if he hadn't, he'd be like a dry drunk, white-knuckling his way through. And the world is better served by a Merlin who's focused on doing his best work rather than his most linkable or profitable or traffic-driving work.

Sometimes not doing something shitty is the only way to do something good.

8. Connect with People You Like (You Look Nice Today)

It's almost impossible to describe *You Look Nice Today* (<http://youlooknicetoday.com/about-you-look-nice-today>) to someone who hasn't heard it, so I'll start by suggesting that you listen.

That said, I know you're trying to learn how to become a self-made billionaire right now, so I'm going to try my best to describe it.

You Look Nice Today is subtitled "A Journal of Emotional Hygiene." Each episode is three men having an intimate, transgressive conversation. That conversation has only one foot in reality; the other foot is squarely in the realm of nonsense, discomfort and absurdity. A typical exchange involves the premise that they need to do some "blue sky imagineering" to come up with a more sustainable business model for the show. A theme restaurant is decided upon. The restaurant's theme: awkward social interactions.



The doorway will be at one end of a long corridor, and at the other end will be the host stand, and the left side of the walkway will be dads with cameras and on the right side of the walkway will be families posing for photographs. To be seated, you must pass between them. This is by no means an unusual topic on You Look Nice Today.

You Look Nice Today has made very little money in and of itself, but I think all three of its hosts would point to it as an essential part of their careers, and it almost didn't happen. None of the three hosts has a background in comedy [one of them, in fact, is the aforementioned Merlin Mann, (<http://twitter.com/#!/hotdogsladies>) along with Adam Lisagor (<http://twitter.com/#!/lonelysandwich>) and Scott Simpson (<http://twitter.com/-!/scottsimpson>)]. In fact, when they conceived of the show, they'd never met in real life.

They were early adopters of Twitter, in the era before it was a platform for celebrities to tell us about their sandwiches, and each just thought the others were funny. They started messaging each other, and that turned into emails, and that turned into “let's be friends,” and that turned into, “let's make something,” and that turned into “You Look Nice Today: A Journal of Emotional Hygiene.” It was a project that none of them would have attempted without the connection, a project that none of them sought out, but it was also a project that changed the course of their careers and lives.

The creepy thing to call this is networking, but I much prefer to call it connecting with people you like. You don't have to have an agenda. When you find someone whose work you like, tell them. When you meet someone you think is interesting, meet them again. The internet is built on community and conversation. That is expected. Engage that back-and-forth. Offer someone a hand, and expect nothing in return. Do something cool with someone you think is cool because the thing will end up cool. You never know what you might end up with.

9. Own What You Create (Felicia Day)

[Felicia Day](http://feliciaday.com/) (<http://feliciaday.com/>) was a struggling actress, and when she talked to her advisors, she got the struggling actress' advice: “Try writing something for yourself!”

She had been obsessed (like literally millions of Americans) with the online game World of Warcraft, so instead of writing a one-woman show, she wrote a treatment for a sitcom about online gamers called The Guild, and took it out to pitch meetings with network executives.



Felicia Day photo by Lan Buiann

Now: television programmers are basically openly hostile to online gaming, so every network she could get a meeting with passed on the show, but that turned out to be a blessing.

Instead of writing a pilot for G4, she rewrote the show as an online series, and financed the pilot herself. It was a hit, and soon media companies were at her door, offering to buy it from her and finance a season. Instead, she sold sponsorships herself (with the help of a staff she hired) directly to the passionate gamer market she knew well because she was part of it, and made a bundle. She was glad to have kept ownership when Microsoft offered a pile of money to license the show for an exclusive distribution window on the Xbox.

Ultimately, when you own your work, you are always building equity. When you work for hire, you're building equity for someone else.

The independent podcasters who distribute their shows through my podcasting network own their work. I make no claim upon it. For me, this is a moral issue for creators. When benefits accrue down the road, in whatever unexpected way they might accrue, they should accrue to the person who took the creative risk of making something. Anyone who tells you otherwise is trying to take advantage of you.

10. Find the Money (Kasper Hauser)

I was talking with one of the founders of the San Francisco Sketchfest (<http://sfsketchfest.com/home/>) once, and she told me a story about the sketch comedy group Kasper Hauser. (<http://www.kasperhauser.com/>) Kasper Hauser were opening for The Upright Citizens Brigade (<http://www.ucbtheatre.com/>) in San Francisco.



Kasper Hauser

They did a set, and walked off stage to a standing ovation. One of the UCB guys – I think it was Ian Roberts – turned to the guy from Sketchfest and said, “Wow. We had a TV show, and these guys don’t?”

I had a similar reaction the first time I saw them perform. They're genuinely among the most brilliant comedy acts I've ever seen. They're also based in San Francisco, which has virtually no comedy industry, and they all have white-collar jobs – two college professors, an MD and a federal public defender.

They were in their 30s, with wives, families and jobs and just didn't want to move to LA and start at the bottom of the TV industry in the hopes of getting one of the two sketch shows a decade that TV executives hand out. So they were taking a couple weeks off of their real jobs once a year, going to the Edinburgh Fringe and winning awards – as a sort of vacation.

One night at a party, one of them was talking to a woman who turned out to be a book agent, and she'd seen them perform, and thought they were amazing, and asked if they'd ever thought of writing a book. They hadn't, but they pitched her shortly thereafter, and she pitched publishers, and they got a book deal. That one (called "Skymaul: Happy Crap You Can Buy From A Plane" (<http://boingboing.net/2006/12/01/skymaul-happy-crap-y.html>) – buy it, it is amazing) lead to two more. They recently signed a deal for their fourth book.

One of the odd things about the new way of doing business is that the money doesn't always come where you expect it. Blog advertising might not pan out, but speaker's fees do. Your notoriety as a podcaster might get you a gig as a television host (it happened to me). One of my best friends owes his entire career not to the iPhone app he created, but to the video he made to promote the iPhone app he created. (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S8yRaWY1xV8>) If you keep your eyes open and do great work, you can find places to make money.

11. Build a Community (Insane Clown Posse)

Now we come to the part of my article where I praise the Insane Clown Posse. (<http://www.insaneclownposse.com/>) If you're not familiar with the ICP, I'll give you the bare bones. After realizing they weren't athletic enough to pursue their true dream of becoming professional wrestlers, two white guys from suburban Detroit decided to take their wrestling outfits (killer clown-themed) and use them in the world of hip-hop. Violent J and Shaggy 2 Dope are terrible at rapping, but they've built enough of a fan base over their 15 or so years of existence that their annual festival, the Gathering of the Juggalos (<http://juggalogathering.com/index.htm>) (Juggalos being the nickname of their fans) draws a five-digit crowd to a shady campground for a weekend of pro wrestling, music, hard drugs and booby-flashing.

Let me say this: the ICP are not for me. And they are probably not for you.

What they understand, though, is that they are for someone.

No matter how terrible their music is (and it is very terrible), they have always dedicated themselves wholeheartedly to their fan community. They've developed strange rituals, like spraying the off-brand citrus soda Faygo on their adherents from the stage. They have a mythology. Their own wrestling league. A whole world of other rappers who wear killer clown makeup. Fans who create their own killer clown characters.

Part of what is important to us about music is music. But if it was just about the music, we'd all listen to Stephen Foster songs and Beethoven, because they pretty much mastered the whole "making pleasing melodies" thing, right?

The other element is identity. Music is an excuse to form a community. The mods don't just love mod music, they love adding rear view mirrors and headlamps to their Lambrettas and painting bulls-eyes on stuff and wearing military surplus and being friends with other people who love those things. That doesn't just hold for music, either – do you think people go to Ren Faires because they've just gotta get their dose of falconry? Harley fans can ride their hogs anywhere, anytime – why do they go to Bike Week? Identity! Community!

No matter what you make, it will become part of someone's identity, and if you can help them share that identity with others, that identity will become a community. And connecting with other people is the most important thing we can do. It's where babies come from! People will gladly pay you for that service.

12. DO A GOOD JOB

Here's the part where I deliver the bad news: I can't make you do a good job. If you're talentless or lazy, none of this will work. If you're talentless and lazy, you're particularly out of luck.

I don't really think that most of what you need is born into you, though. Mostly, you just need to care, and try. You need to make something, and then make it again, a little better. You need to look around for money. You need to reach your hand out to meet someone when it would be easier to keep to yourself. You need to make something for you when it would be easier just do what someone else tells you to. All of these things are hard, but none of them require anything more than gumption. Which I bet you have.

So: make your thing.



Insane Clown Posse

Selected Comments on “Jesse Thorn”

barrett (<http://hearingvoices.com>) says:

I feel honored to be first to say: Jesse, what a well-writ and inspiring treatise. Thanks for putting it on Transom.

David Lee Ingersoll (<http://skookworks.com>) says:

Time to get to work.

No, actually, time to keep working. Never stop. Keep moving.

mike mckeon says:

What a informative article. It reminds me of listening to a Robert Rodriguez audio commentry on a DVD, Then I felt I could go direct a movie.After reading this I feel I can publish a creation in a appropate media.

Aaron Brox (<http://www.twitchdad.net>) says:

Awesome awesome awesome. You’ve put into words so much of what I’ve been wrestling with. Okay – consumption of ideas complete. Time to go create something.

Talentless says:

How do you know if you’re talentless?! The end ruined this for me.

breena bloodmoon says:

You will never know if you don’t try. It’s a gamble always, I’m trying to start a small business, making webcomics. I might not succeed. The point of the article though is if you don’t succeed try try again and don’t be lazy keep on pushing!

Brian Snider (<http://secretly-important.com>) says:

This is just want I needed at just the right time. Jesse has been a hero of mine for some time now, and was the inspiration for me starting my own website and podcast. I’ve been doing it for almost a year and slowly but surely I’ve been building readers and listeners. For about two to three weeks though I’ve been feeling stagnate. Interviews have been harder to confirm, and other interviews that I’ve completed get deleted from garageband. More then a few times I thought to myself that I should just pack it all in and sell off the equipment I’ve bought, life would be so much easier if I quite all this and got a real job again.

Just reading this article inspired me to get back on the horse and power through the difficult times. I'm not going to get better, the website's not going to get better, and I'm not going to have any new fans if I don't continue. As I said before reading this article at just this time was divine intervention (or something of the like.) Thank you.

Mitchmaster says:

I should have guessed from the goofy title, but I was expected something more specific. Yes, these anecdotes and biographies are inspiring, but they contain precious little practical advice. In fact many of the people described here strike me as the hyper-driven kind who succeed despite all odds, a group most of us would like to belong to but do not.

Jesse Thorn (<http://www.maximumfun.org>) says:

Mitchmaster – what kind of specific advice would you like? This is a pretty short article, intended to apply to a pretty broad range of pursuits. I think that part of the point here is that the categories have narrowed dramatically, and you can't simply emulate the process of someone who's already successful. I'm already the (somewhat) successful me – that slot's taken. You have to be able to generalize from the specific to apply it to your interests and circumstances.

Carole (<http://carolewaihail.com>) says:

Mitchmaster, I think you miss an important point of the article, the “hyper-driven kind who succeed despite all odds” you said most people would like to be part but are not... All you have to do is to persist. Maybe you not gonna become a millionaire but if you do what you love and do it well, you can make a living out of it. Isn't it enough? Live ot do something you love?

Jamie Feinberg (<http://notyourmomsmusicaltheater.com>) says:

This was as well written and awesome as I was hoping it would be. It also makes me admire you and what you do even more. I'm happy to say I'm making my thing, and figuring out how to make it pay too. Thanks so much for sharing your insight.

Ronnie says:

Jesse,

Informative as always. I've heard many of these same principles again and again in the various entrepreneurship / diy / self employment media I've been consuming lately.

Everyone I know know tells me not to quit my great paying stable job, but everyone I look up to says “quit dithering and jump already”, so I have already committed to quitting my job in 8 weeks. I (I’m only waiting because I want to take care of a few things before I lose my health insurance!)I don’t know what I’m going to do, but I’ve saved some money, got rid of most of my stuff, and told everyone I know that I’m doing it so I’ll look silly if I back down. I have a ton of ideas though, and I am no stranger to work. Just making the leap is enough of a victory for me though, and the light at the end of the tunnel has allowed me to go sober for the first time in 7 years with very little effort.

Thanks again!

Doug Mitchell says:

I met Jesse when he was a student producing a show at the college station at UC-Santa Cruz. I ran NPR’s next generation radio at the time and was always trawling for young people who I thought would make good leaders. I found few over the years. You can hear them now on NPR and especially on stations around the country.

Through emails, Jesse and I met up at the NFCB conference in San Francisco that spring. He drove up from school. We talked for a bit and vowed to stay in touch. He wasn’t “Jesse Thorn” of today at that time, just a bright, creative vagabond trying to express himself over- the-air. I knew he was going to do something big, just no clue what that was going to be.

I wanted to have him come to DC and be the EP of Intern Edition. It didn’t happen. Yeah, I missed it. I’ve been following and listening ever since and am not surprised he’s risen to creative genius within the space (tightly controlled as it is) that is public radio. I believe that talent will always rise regardless of the limitations of the medium. They will rise to make it better if given the chance. There are only so many Jesse’s who will doggedly remain committed to us so what’s our commitment to them?

Jesse, you go man.

Jesse Thorn (<http://www.maximumfun.org>) says:

Thanks, Doug. I think your point is really important in the public radio context.

I don’t think you could find someone with more commitment to public radio than I have, but I’ve thought about quitting many times. Both before and after my “success.” There’s a new media landscape, and public media needs to embrace outside, independent forces. For its own benefit!

Aaron Frey (<http://www.frshgrnd.com>) says:

Inspirational – we’ve all heard the advice before, but the great illustrative examples make it seem within reach.

Jenna (<http://www.Jennaantonelli.com>) says:

This is a fantastic piece of writing and the best collection of advise i’ve seen. As a new graduate who is currently making important career path decisions this has been really helpful. Whenever I second-guess striving to fulfill dreams I can look back at this, collect my thoughts, and get back to work. I’ve already passed this onto many friends.

Now to attempt sleep despite how creatively charged I am now. Thank you for writing this!

Joel Sage (<http://www.joelsage.com>) says:

Jesse, I always enjoy listening to you on the Judge John Hodgman podcast, and this article is as insightful as your bailiff duties are hilarious. Thank you.

mark says:

Not everyone can be succesful like this. Many people or just simple workers. Do a job, earn money for living life. Nothing wrong with that. The need to make money is just modern slavery, to keep the little people occupied otherwise they only make trouble.

Jesse Thorn (<http://www.maximumfun.org>) says:

I agree (well, up until the modern slavery part). Nothing wrong with having a job. I still had a “real” job for the majority of my career. And if your passion isn’t your job, that’s nothing to be ashamed of. Hopefully your passion is rewarding in non-monetary ways.

Joe Avella (<http://www.masterofinventions.com/>) says:

3 years ago my friend had heart surgery, and Jesse called him in the hospital AND sent a hilarious card. Class act. This guy walks it like he talks it. Pay attention.

Thanks Jesse!

Agh. says:

Depressing. This is like advice from a pretty girl on how to be pretty. “Just be pretty!”

If you want an awesome show you should just be awesome everybody.

Marco Raaphorst (<http://marcoraaphorst.nl>) says:

normally I don't like these tips-lists. this one is great. thanks a lot! greetz from Holland!

Jay says:

Jesse, there is little doubt that you are a sincere and stand- up guy. But I have read stuff like this for years and they make great little anecdotes but why these stores always miss by a mile is all the underlying factors that contribute to a person's success. For an insight into what I am referring to – read Malcom Gladwell's book - Outliers.

Presented above are all the same story, told over again with different characters and settings but the story line is always the same. Person tries and fails, person keeps trying when everyone else gives up – person succeeds tremendously and lives happily ever after. Ever hear about the guy that invented the windshield wiper delay system for automobiles? He tried and tried and eventually he lost his family, his kids, his life, but got some money in the end.

My point is that there are so so many people that have done all the trying, work and dedication and have come up short – you'll never see an article or hear a show about them, maybe a passing snide remark from a relative or past friend, but not featured stories. The difficulty I have with this, is that people actually think that if they follow steps like these laid out here, that they can “use the formula” and achieve their goals. Some will, many won't. The nay- sayers will say “they gave up too soon” or they just didn't work hard enough. Some will spend their lives trying and NEVER succeed in a way that satisfies their goals.

So let me add this one nugget of wisdom I have learned in life –

#13 Allow Yourself To Be Successful

Many set goals so high that they never consider themselves successful. They don't make enough money, aren't skinny enough, don't get the web traffic their competitor gets etc., etc. We all feel we are measured by the same life scale that the developed world has engineered and programmed into every one of us. It's fair, honest and it judges by just the facts.

But life isn't like that. That's the junk we build in our own minds and judge ourselves with, torture ourselves with. I tell my kids to act in good faith, treat others as they want to be treated and not to worry so much about what people think of them. You see, most people are usually so worried about what other people think of them, that they spend little time thinking about you. (I feel like Mr Brady from the Brady Bunch but I think you'll get my drift.)

In a few generations most of us will be completely forgotten about, save the very very rare one that works and stumbles her/his way to stardom in their field. So aim high – yes, but take it in attainable steps and allow yourself to be successful at what you do.

Everyone can't be on top or it would be a pancake.

No disrespect meant to your piece.

Jesse Thorn (<http://www.maximumfun.org>) says:

I think the goals I've set here are pretty modest – as I mention in the piece, for most of my career, doing this hasn't been my main job. Even now I barely qualify for upper-middle class – I can't afford to buy a house, for one thing.

I find that doing something that I really care about provides me with tremendous satisfaction. This was true when I was doing it part-time on the side and working as an admin in an office, and it's true now when it's a job I work at 50 or 60 hours a week. Chris Hardwick, for example, was earning great money and a huge "success" when he was hosting Shipmates, but was totally miserable. He made a lot less money doing standup in the years afterward before he made the Nerdist thing work for him financially, but he did get by, and found it much more rewarding.

My frank advice is that whatever the scale, working very hard on creating something regularly for yourself is very rewarding. We're lucky to live in a world where if you create media and are in the first world, you can reach people without intermediaries and gatekeepers or even significant financial resources, which has never before been the case. That's pretty amazing.

I chose these folks because when you're choosing examples you want to pick high-profile examples of people who have really knocked it out of the park, but there are plenty of places along the scale where there is plenty of reward, financial and otherwise.

Janet Jay says:

Here's some interesting reading that you've been apparently yearning for: "Born Losers: A History of Failure in America." Written by one of my former profs, it's fascinating, both as a new perspective and as a way to maybe avoid some of the factors that led to failure. Mostly just a good book though.

http://www.amazon.com/Born-Losers-History-Failure-America/dp/067402107X/ref=sr_1_4?ie=UTF8&qid=1330622400&sr=8-4
(http://www.amazon.com/Born-Losers-History-Failure-America/dp/067402107X/ref=sr_1_4?ie=UTF8&qid=1330622400&sr=8-4)

Sara says:

There is one glaring omission here: you never actually say how you went from making 10k a year to having a small staff. How did that leap happen? That is you say, “I started working on a new plan,” but you never explicate what that plan entailed. I’d like to know, frankly.

Jesse Thorn (<http://www.maximumfun.org>) says:

Well, I think my path would be very different from yours, as mine was very different from all of the folks above. That’s why I didn’t want to focus on the nuts-and-bolts of how I finance my business.

For me, basically, I’m supported mostly by donation. So I built up my audience, did more stuff to connect more strongly with them and improved/professionalized my fundraising. I also started an annual event that’s not unlike the Gathering of the Juggalos (structually, not tonally) which brings in some money, and broadened my efforts into a network once I had a fundraising infrastructure in place.

Jennifer (<http://www.kasshealth.com>) says:

Thank you, Jesse! My favorite is the last paragraph of each section. Your spirit really comes thru and the words of wisdom flow. Thanks for the inspiration. Every day I wake up, I make it my mission to serve others, and as you’ve said, I can use a variety of different mediums which has been so freakin’ fun.

Walt Ribeiro (<http://fororchestra.com>) says:

This article is true. The Insane Clown Posse is an example of a niche market who says “forget the haters, we’ll just pay attention to our community”. And though it’s not a mainstream audience, they have such a loyal following it’s insane (pun intended). I love Jonathan Coulton’s music and actually arranged some of his songs for orchestra – he’s what got me started as an arranger. Great blog post, some very common themes amongst how to make it, but what set it apart was the care you put in finding examples and making each point a personal reflection. Well done.

John Tynan (<http://opensourcebroadcasting.net>) says:

Jesse, while this point was mentioned several times, almost in passing, I would elevate this idea to it’s own bullet point:

“Make something that you yourself would use.”

Recently, I’ve been iterating and iterating, cycling through different ideas and projects.

After one particular project which I devoted a ton of time to spectacularly missed the mark, a friend and colleague, Barrett (who a lot of you in public radio will know), offered this advice, which I am glad to have taken to heart, “Make something that you yourself would use.”

If you are looking for a way to get started Making Your Thing, I’d say this is a good place to start.

Melissa Allison says:

Thorn Words to Live By:

Caring is important, but preciousness is the opposite of making stuff. There is no room on the internet for Special Snowflakes who want to procrastinate all day and then drink themselves to sleep and dream about their unwritten novel.

Sometimes not doing something shitty is the only way to do something good.

Do something cool with someone you think is cool because the thing will end up cool.

Love (<http://www.lovetofeel.com>) says:

This was a great article! A simple but very detailed breakdown of the basics that sometimes get forgotten in the chaos of creating something for the world.

About Transom

What We're Trying To Do

Transom.org channels new work and voices to public radio through the Internet, and discusses that work, and encourages more. Transom is a performance space, an open editorial session, an audition stage, a library, and a hangout. Our purpose is to pass the baton of mission and good practice in public media.

We invite Guests to come write about their work here to 1) keep the perspective changing so we're not stuck in one way of hearing, 2) let us in on the thoughts of creative minds, and 3) foster a critical and editorial dialog about radio work, a rare thing. Our Discussion Boards give us a place to talk it all over.

We accept submissions for featured audio pieces and for "Sidebar" entries.

- Sidebars are short (500 words or so) essays, rants, opinion pieces, useful advice, etc.
- Submitted audio can be stories, sound portraits, interviews, found sound, non-fiction pieces, audio art, whatever, as long as it's good listening. Material may be submitted by anyone, anywhere--by citizens with stories to tell, by radio producers trying new styles, by writers and artists wanting to experiment with radio. We're looking for things that are less heard, different angles, new voices, new ways of telling, and any other good pieces that haven't found another way onto public radio. Editors evaluate material more by what it does than what it is. Some questions they'll consider:

- On the air, would it keep you by your radio until it's over?
- Is the maker someone of talent who should be encouraged?
- Does it push at the boundary of conventional radio in an exciting way?
- Will it provoke fruitful discussion online?

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Atlantic Public Media administers Transom.org. APM is a non-profit organization based in Woods Hole, Massachusetts that has as its mission "to serve public broadcasting through training and mentorship, and through support for creative and experimental approaches to program production and distribution." APM has been the creative force behind projects like the Public Radio Exchange (prx.org), The Moth Radio Hour, This I Believe, and others. APM is the founding group for WCAI, the public radio service for Cape Cod, Martha's Vineyard, and Nantucket. Transom.org receives funding from the Ford Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts.