

MELISSA TUNES IN

By Donald Lewis

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CHARACTERS

MELISSA	12, bright, brash, selfishly sees the world from only her perspective
MOM	30s – 40s, MELISSA's hardworking single mom
TV DAD	30s – 40s, MELISSA's television dad, a throwback to sitcoms of yesteryear
TV MOM	30s – 40s, MELISSA's television mom, also a throwback (can double MOM)
FRITZ	10, television brother
PEE-WEE	7, television sister
TELLY	a television spirit, sounding very much like TV Dad doing Kojak's Telly Savalas (can double TV DAD)
HEDDY	a headphones spirit, sounding very much like a sweet and sensitive mom (can double MOM)
LAP T	a lap top computer spirit, sounding very much like Melissa as a rapper (can double MOM)
ANNOUNCER	voiceover. (can double TV DAD)

PROP LIST

Portable TV
CD player with headphones
CD with "Parental Advisory" label
Laptop computer
Doll with detachable head
Birthday cake with "14" candle
Wooden Spoon
Wallet with ID
Colorful apron
Applause/Laugh signs

TIME & PLACE

A preteen girl's room, a colorful mess. Fall, present.

PRODUCTION NOTES

The set is meant to be as realistic as production resources allow. There are also three lighting schemes over the course of the play to reflect the play's movement through time and the main character's growth.

Though the play is written to be double cast with five actors, the cast can be expanded to as many as ten for school and larger cast productions.

Ladies First by Queen Latifah is suggested as the female empowering rap leading the cast off the stage and the audience out of the theatre. You might have another choice (or none) and that's fine. Please know that if you select material protected under copyright, you must obtain permission to use it.

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*For
Veronika and Kadidja*

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SETTING: *A preteen girl's room. Posters, stuffed animals, electronics and all manner of bric-a-brac cry for attention in this colorful mess.*

AT RISE: *Twilight. MELISSA sits on her bed playing a laptop computer game, moving to rap music over headphones. A SITCOM drones in the background from a television perched on a bureau.*

MOM: *(offstage; approaching)* Melissa ... *(The girl can't possibly hear.)* Melissa ...

(MOM knocks on the door. No response. MOM slowly opens it, dressed in office attire. SHE'S drained but tries to put on a good face for her daughter.)

MOM: M ...sweetheart ... *(MELISSA doesn't see or hear her. MOM approaches from behind. SHE taps her on the shoulder and MELISSA jumps.)* Hi-de-ho ...

MELISSA: Mom!

MOM: I'm home.

MELISSA: What are you doing?

MOM: What do you mean?

MELISSA: You totally scared me.

MOM: I'm sorry. I didn't mean to.

MELISSA: You're supposed to knock.

MOM: I did.

MELISSA: Hello ...you're in my room.

MOM: I wasn't aware it was a crime.

MELISSA: If it isn't, it should be.

MOM: Did you do your homework?

MELISSA: It's Friday.

MOM: I know, believe me.

MELISSA: I don't have homework. I have a project.

MOM: When is your project due?

MELISSA: Three weeks.

MOM: What's it about?

MELISSA: Mother ...

MOM: Melissa Meyers ...

MELISSA: Fine.

MOM: You know how that irritates me.

MELISSA: You're my mother.

MOM: It makes me sound like some alien being.

MELISSA: Euripides.

MOM: Excuse me?

MELISSA: I'm doing a project on Euripides.

MOM: I thought you didn't like studying insects.

MELISSA: He was a playwright in ancient Greece. He wrote tragedies.

MOM: Oh.

MELISSA: It's not something you'd be interested in.

MOM: I'm interested.

MELISSA: You thought he was a bug.

MOM: Look ...I can go back out. We can try this again.

MELISSA: That's not necessary.

MOM: I just came home. I wanted to let my daughter know that her poor, hapless mother has once again returned to her dearly beloved after slaving away in the salt mines for ten hours, a day of which I'd like to have back.

MELISSA: Couldn't you just cook dinner?

MOM: I could but for some unknown reason I prefer the personal approach which has something to do with the fact that I gave you birth once upon a time.

MELISSA: Are you trying to make me feel guilty?

MOM: I am trying to make you feel ...feel for somebody other than yourself, Melissa. **(MOM turns off the television.)** It's Friday...why do we have to start up?

MELISSA: You came into my room without asking and you just totally turned off the TV.

MOM: I apologized and you weren't totally watching the TV. Now can we get on with life?

MELISSA: What if I was indecent?

MOM: What would constitute being indecent?

MELISSA: Being naked?

MOM: I've seen you naked ...I even used to change your diapers on a regular basis, thank you very much, mom. There's nothing indecent about the human body.

MELISSA: That's what you think.

MOM: Oh.

MELISSA: There is such a thing as cable.

MOM: Cable?

MELISSA: 257 channels. There's everything.

MOM: Not in this house.

MELISSA: Tommy Flannigan's.

MOM: Tommy Flannigan ...he's an eighth grader.

MELISSA: His sister, Jennifer. She's in my class.

MOM: I thought you and Jennifer were (**putting fingers in quotes**) "incommunicado".

MELISSA: I have ears ...hello ...

(MOM takes a seat next to her.)

MOM: What is it?

MELISSA: What is what?

MOM: I've been around the block, Melissa. I ought to know when something's wrong.

MELISSA: There's nothing wrong.

MOM: Are you mad that I'm late again?

MELISSA: No.

MOM: I tried to leave on time ...I really did.

MELISSA: I didn't say you didn't.

MOM: Is it that boy?

MELISSA: What boy?

MOM: That boy ...what's his name ...

MELISSA: I don't have a boyfriend. I don't have any friends. You've made sure of that.

MOM: You have friends.

MELISSA: I have peers. Their association with me is strictly unnecessary.

MOM: Maybe you need to work a little harder at it.

MELISSA: That's impossible with mom breathing down my neck and making sure I don't have any choices except for kids I have absolutely nothing in common with. (**MOM takes the headphones off.**) Hey! (**MOM puts them on, listening.**) It's not your kind of music.

MOM: Where's the jewel case?

MELISSA: Mom ...

MOM: The jewel case ... (**MELISSA hands it over. MOM looks at the "Parental Advisory" label on the cover.**) "Parental Advisory".

MELISSA: One swear word.

MOM: One?

MELISSA: That's all.

MOM: How often does he repeat it?

MELISSA: I'm entitled to some privacy.

MOM: I'm entitled to know how this CD made its way into our house, given that you have no friends.

MELISSA: I borrowed it.

MOM: From who?

MELISSA: A peer. **(MOM removes the CD from the player and puts it in the jewel case.)** How old do I have to be?

MOM: Twenty-six.

MELISSA: Serious.

MOM: You're twelve, Melissa.

MELISSA: I'm almost thirteen. I'll be fourteen next year.

MOM: You have no business listening to this.

MELISSA: You're dissing me.

MOM: No ...

MELISSA: Your mom didn't take away your music.

MOM: It was a different time.

MELISSA: Oh yeah, wow, groovy, outta sight, Neil Diamond ...

MOM: We had records ...no CDs with warning labels. TV ...no cable with locked channels. Computers ...if there was a world wide web, it was the Communist conspiracy that was going to take over the world.

MELISSA: Records.

MOM: Black disks made of vinyl ...you placed them on a turntable ...why are you trying to make me feel like I should be walking with a cane?

MELISSA: It's not fair.

(MOM gives her a hug.)

MOM: One thing at a time, okay?

MELISSA: What do you mean?

MOM: Television, music, computer ...pick one.

MELISSA: You're kidding.

MOM: Two eyes, two ears, one electronic device.

MELISSA: That's impossible. **(MOM looks at her, waiting for a response.)** What?

MOM: Which one?

MELISSA: Which one what?

MOM: You have to choose.

MELISSA: Now?

MOM: I'm not leaving till you do. **(MELISSA sighs, considering her dilemma.)** At least you have a choice.

MELISSA: Don't.

MOM: There are children who go to bed hungry every night, children who don't have their own room --

MELISSA: I know.

MOM: You should be grateful for having a choice.

MELISSA: I am.

(MOM stretches out on her bed, getting far too comfortable.)

MOM: Some children even have to share their bed. It's quite common in refugee camps --

MELISSA: Okay ...okay ...the TV ...

MOM: You select the television.

MELISSA: How else am I going to see dad?

MOM: He's taking you for your birthday next month. He --

MELISSA: -- promised this time. He probably doesn't even know how old I am.

MOM: I wish we were a perfect family, Melissa, but we're not.

MELISSA: Why is it he always happens to get work when I'm supposed to visit?

MOM: It's the nature of the business.

MELISSA: The business sucks.

MOM: Such is life.

MELISSA: Life sucks. **(MOM gets up, giving MELISSA a kiss.)** It does. Children shouldn't have to go to bed hungry every night.

MOM: I'm trusting you.

MELISSA: Fine.

MOM: And just so you know, if there is a lapse of memory and/or judgment, I will remove your entertainment options for a month and we will visit the land of the printed word exclusively. Comprene?

MELISSA: Serious?

MOM: Like a heart attack. **(SHE walks to the door, CD in hand.)** Speaking of which, dinner at eight ...hot dogs, fries, macs and cheese ...

MELISSA: Ha, ha.

MOM: Hi-de-ho ...

MELISSA: Hi-de-ho ...

MOM: Ahem ...

MELISSA: **(more enthusiasm)** Hi-de-ho ...

MOM: And in between commercials, your room ...

MELISSA: I know where everything is.

MOM: It needs attention. So does the old lady from time to time. Life's not always about you and what's between your ears.

(MOM leaves, closing the door behind her.)

MELISSA: **(to herself)** Sieg Heil ...

(SHE looks at her headphones, her laptop. SHE reluctantly retires both to a book shelf.)

MELISSA: **(ala Schwarzenegger)** I'll be back.

(SHE walks to her bed, flipping on the television.)

MELISSA: And here we are at the freaking dawn of civilization... ***(A LAUGH TRACK chirps back at her)*** Oh, shut up. ***(flops down on her bed)*** Don't take it personally. You're the only friend I've got. We have a ***(putting her fingers in quotes)*** "relationship". ***(punches in another station; a news report)*** A Special Report? Hello ...I'm not interested in the news. ***(punches another station; another news report; punches other stations; more news reports)*** I want to be entertained. Isn't there anything entertaining on? ***(repeatedly punches, returning to the sitcom and a LAUGH TRACK chirps)*** Look, just because I picked you doesn't mean I can't turn you off because I can and I will so don't test me. ***(The TV drones. SHE wields the remote.)*** Huh? What did you say? You dissing me? ***(A LAUGH TRACK chirps. SHE turns it off.)*** Dis you back ...anytime, dude ...easy Parcheesi ...my wish is my command ... ***(turns it on, turns it off, turns it on, turns it off)*** I'm not a slave. I have a brain. I have a free will. You know what that means? Of course, you don't. You're a total idiot box. ***(closes her eyes, laughing to herself)*** That's why I love you when you're not pre-empted with world stupidity. You're the next best thing to macadamia nut butterscotch fudge swirl ...utterly lacking in nutritional value ...null and void ...everything and nothing ...my idiot box ...my knock-knock-who's-there-nothing-going-on-upstairs-check-you-later dolt of an idiot box...

(SHE drifts off. TWILIGHT slowly turns to NIGHT. A loud rap at the door. SHE turns, waking. TV DAD throws open the door, LIGHTS UP to sitcom harshness.)

TV DAD: Hi-de-ho, the Dad's in the house... ***(APPLAUSE SIGNS flash, the audience prompted to applaud his entrance -- could be augmented with an APPLAUSE TRACK. MELISSA turns, waking. TV DAD throws open the door, LIGHTS UP to sitcom harshness.)*** How's my little snookums?

MELISSA: Uh ...

TV DAD: Sleepy-tired, boobily-boo?

MELISSA: Wha ...

TV DAD: Where do books sleep?

MELISSA: Huh?

TV DAD: Where do books sleep, M?

MELISSA: Where do books sleep?

TV DAD: Under the covers. ***(LAUGH SIGNS FLASH, the audience prompted to laugh.)*** Heard that one around the water cooler this

morning. So how was your day? What have you been up to? You do your homework?

MELISSA: What are you doing here?

TV DAD: I haven't seen your brother and sister. Are they planning a sneak attack?

MELISSA: My brother and --

TV DAD: Fritz and Pee-wee.

MELISSA: I don't have a brother and sister.

TV DAD: Melissa, are you in denial again?

MELISSA: What are you doing here, dad?

TV DAD: Just checking in.

MELISSA: No, what are you doing here ...in this house?

TV DAD: I live here.

MELISSA: Since when?

TV DAD: We're in our fifth season. I guess that makes it five years.

MELISSA: **(calling)** Mom ...

(TV MOM parades through the door, apron on, wooden spoon in hand, a picture of domestication.)

TV MOM: Hello, dear ...**(APPLAUSE SIGNS FLASH. TV DAD gives her a peck.)** How was work?

TV DAD: The brain is a wonderful organ. It starts working the moment you get up in the morning and doesn't stop till you get in the office.

(LAUGH SIGNS FLASH.)

TV MOM: Plato?

TV DAD: Nope.

TV MOM: Aristotle?

TV DAD: Robert Frost, American poet, 1874 to 1963.

TV MOM: Did you get the account?

TV DAD: I'm fairly certain that's in next week's episode.

TV MOM: I'm sure you're right.

TV DAD: I usually am. I'm the leader of the pack, the man with a plan, the patriarch who's never stuck in the dark.

TV MOM: Well, duty calls.

TV DAD: KP ...a glorious adventure. I remember my days at Camp Pendleton like they were last week.

TV MOM: They were last week. You had a flashback in that episode, dear.

TV DAD: Right you are. So what's on the menu?

TV MOM: Pot roast, steamed Brussels sprouts, potatoes au gratin and sweet potato pie with caramelized marshmallows.

TV DAD: Sensational ...and we have three minutes to eat it. **(LAUGH SIGNS flash. TV MOM laughs along.)** That's my girl.

TV MOM: You're my guy.

TV DAD: What a laugh.

TV MOM: What a sense of humor.

TV DAD: Hey, where do books sleep?

TV MOM: Under the covers. **(TV DAD laughs, snorting.)** Water cooler? **(HE nods, eyes tearing. SHE looks at MELISSA.)** You have such a terrific father. What did we do to get so lucky?

MELISSA: Lucky? **(The two turn to leave.)** Wait! **(TV MOM and TV DAD stop.)** Wait one second! What's going on here?

TV DAD: I believe the family's going to have dinner after a commercial break.

MELISSA: What commercial break?

TV MOM: I've tried to make dinner with the snap of my fingers, sweetheart, but my magical powers don't occur until later in the season.

MELISSA: I don't eat pot roast.

TV MOM: You had it in the season opener.

MELISSA: I don't eat anything that requires a stove because you're inept in the kitchen. You can't boil spaghetti.

TV DAD: Say, that's no way to speak to su madre.

MELISSA: She's not my mother and for your 411, you're not my father. **(TV DAD looks at TV MOM, sharing a smile.)** I didn't say it to be funny.

TV DAD: A chip off the old block ...

TV MOM: Full of intelligence and charm ...

TV DAD: That's our Melissa ...

TV MOM: Sweet Melissa ...

TV DAD: Isn't life wonderful?

MELISSA: **(disgusted)** Uhhhhggg ...

(“LIFE SUCKS” flashes, the audience prompted to shout it. Terribly GENERIC THEME MUSIC begins.)

ANNOUNCER (V.O.): With TV Dad ...**(TV DAD turns to the audience, smiling.)** TV Mom ...**(TV MOM looks up at TV DAD, clutching lovingly onto his arm.)** Fritz and Pee-Wee ...**(FRITZ runs into the room with a doll, PEE-WEE running after him.)** ...and Melissa Dingleberry as Melissa!

(APPLAUSE SIGNS FLASH. The kids tug at the doll, TV MOM and TV DAD strolling out arm in arm. MELISSA grabs the doll and the head comes off in her hand.)

MELISSA: Get out of my room! **(The kids run out. MELISSA throws the head on the floor, walking over to the door. SHE slams it shut. THEME MUSIC ENDS. SHE warily looks over at the audience. MELISSA approaches, not sure of the boundaries of her imagination.)** This ...this is not my family. I have a single mom, no brothers and sisters, and I have a dad that doesn't live here because he left us so he can play bit parts on TV shows that don't last more than three episodes and movies so bad they're impossible to find at the video store because they suck which is really, really, totally stupid. Most of all, my life doesn't have an audience because it sucks. It's not a TV show ...it's real, it's boring and it's not funny. **(AWWW SIGNS FLASH, the audience feeling sorry for her.)** Stop it! Go away! Leave me alone!

(SHE walks away from the audience. MELISSA sits on the edge of her bed, indignantly waiting for the audience to leave. SHE crawls under the covers, yanking them over her head. POOF! A cloud of smoke and a walking, talking television appears ...TELLY.)

TELLY: **(TV DAD sounding like Telly Savalas)** Hey, baby. Feelin' a little down? **(MELISSA peeks out from under the covers.)** Over here. It's your old friend, Telly. **(SHE looks curiously at the television.)** No, over here. **(SHE turns, seeing TELLY.)** Ehhhh ...

MELISSA: Dad?

TELLY: Do I look like your dad?

MELISSA: Sort of.

TELLY: He's reading the paper, just like he always does when he comes home from a hard day at the office.

MELISSA: Who are you?

TELLY: Telly ...this is Telly, baby.

MELISSA: A talking television.

TELLY: An escaped spirit, a manifestation of sight, sound and of mind.

(SHE crawls out of bed and walks over to TELLY, looking him over.)

MELISSA: TV's don't talk. They ...they transmit signals.

TELLY: Easy, doll. I'm the only friend you've got.

MELISSA: Who says?

TELLY: You did. We've got a relationship.

MELISSA: I was speaking, uh, metaphorically.

TELLY: Where are they?

MELISSA: Who?

TELLY: Your friends.

MELISSA: They're not here.

TELLY: Why not?

MELISSA: They have things to do.

TELLY: Sure, doll.

MELISSA: They're playing soccer. They're in the Chess Club. They -- they go to the library, scouting, chorus. One works in a scuzzy soup kitchen.

TELLY: A scuzzy soup kitchen.

MELISSA: She prepares food for homeless people.

TELLY: Sounds like the real deal.

MELISSA: She's a new kid. She doesn't know any better.

TELLY: What's your excuse?

MELISSA: I have other interests.

TELLY: Such as?

MELISSA: What I'm doing.

TELLY: Which is?

MELISSA: Nothing.

TELLY: So they're out learning and helping and achieving and experiencing all that life has to offer and you're not.

MELISSA: Don't make it sound like it's a big deal.

TELLY: It's the only deal.

MELISSA: So?

TELLY: Sew buttons on a rubber duck. Ehhhh ...

MELISSA: Do you mind?

TELLY: You're several dimes short in the relationship department, baby, to say nothing of your disinterest in what goes on outside these four walls. That begs the question. **(SHE turns away.)** What's a nice girl like you doing in a dump like this?

MELISSA: It's not a dump. It's my room.

TELLY: It's a dump.

MELISSA: Who asked you?

TELLY: Friends tell each other the truth.

MELISSA: I have stuff. What kid doesn't?

TELLY: Lotta kids. Want to see?

MELISSA: Hello ...I know ...

TELLY: Ever consider doing something about it?

MELISSA: I'm considering not talking to you anymore.

TELLY: Okay, I'll do the talking. You stay in your room all the time with all your stuff with a television for your only friend and you know what happens?

MELISSA: I'm not answering.

TELLY: You know what happens, baby? Nothing. Nada. Zilch. Zippo.

MELISSA: Shut up! Shut up, shut up, shut up!

(The door opens, FRITZ entering. APPLAUSE SIGNS FLASH.)

FRITZ: Who are you talking to?

MELISSA: Huh?

FRITZ: I heard you talking to somebody.

MELISSA: What's it to you?

FRITZ: There's nobody here. It troubles me, sis.

MELISSA: I am not your sister.

FRITZ: Are you in denial again?

MELISSA: Did you knock?

FRITZ: I never knock.

MELISSA: What if I was indecent?

FRITZ: You mean, what if you were naked? Woo-woo-woo ...

(MELISSA walks over to her bed.) You're getting so weird, sis.

MELISSA: I am not your sister, ignoramus.

FRITZ: You're talking to the TV again, aren't you?

MELISSA: I don't talk to inanimate objects.

FRITZ: You talk to the toilet when it doesn't go down all the way.

MELISSA: How do you know that?

FRITZ: What's a little brother for? **(FRITZ walks over to TELLY. HE looks him over.)** Check it out.

MELISSA: Do you mind?

FRITZ: No.

MELISSA: Get away from it.

FRITZ: What is it?

MELISSA: It's an escaped TV spirit.

FRITZ: You expect me to believe that?

MELISSA: Yeah ...now would you leave?

FRITZ: What's it escaping from?

MELISSA: How should I know?

FRITZ: The news? The Special Report?

MELISSA: Why not?

FRITZ: You're just saying that to appear ignorant.

MELISSA: I'm not ignorant.

FRITZ: Personally I prefer idiot programming because it soothes the savage beast and limits the imagination ...just what we need in these troubling times.

MELISSA: If idiot programming limits the imagination, why are you here?

FRITZ: Hey, that's an existential question. Good one, M. Who are we? Why are we here? If a TV loses its signal in the forest, does anybody hear it snow?

(PEE-WEE walks in. APPLAUSE SIGNS flash.)

PEE-WEE: You have my dolly's head. I want my dolly's head back.

MELISSA: Excuse me ...

PEE-WEE: It's really, really important because she can't ignore the Special Report on TV if she doesn't have her head.

MELISSA: Did you knock?

PEE-WEE: Was I supposed to?

MELISSA: Hello ...this is my room.

FRITZ: A dump ...that's what the escaped TV spirit said.

PEE-WEE: What escaped TV spirit?

FRITZ: It's right over there.

PEE-WEE: Where did it escape from?

FRITZ: Three guesses.

PEE-WEE: Melissa's TV?

FRITZ: Brilliant, junior.

PEE-WEE: How come I can't have an escaped TV spirit?

FRITZ: It's her only friend. Cut her some slack.

PEE-WEE: It's not fair. All I get is hand-me-downs, hand-me-downs, hand-me-downs ...

(MELISSA walks over to the audience, pleading.)

MELISSA: Do you believe? Do you believe in the power of reality? If you believe, put your hands together and clap ...clap your hands ...clap your hands ...***(APPLAUSE SIGNS FLASH, prompting the audience to clap.)*** Restore my life ...change it back to the way it was ...for my sake ...for the sake of kids who have too much stuff everywhere ...***(SHE drops to her knees, eyes closed, hands clutched. MELISSA looks behind. FRITZ, PEE-WEE and TELLY stare back, still very much there. SHE gets up, returning.)*** Okay ...out, out, scram, shoo, beat it ...***(SHE forces the siblings out, the two protesting. MELISSA closes the door. SHE pushes her bed in front of it, blocking further entrance. SHE walks past the television, flipping it on.)*** Not one word ...

TELLY: I thought I did pretty good.

MELISSA: I can have more than one electronic device on at a time because this is not my family.

TELLY: They seem to think so.

MELISSA: Who's going to stop me ...TV Mom? She's busy in the kitchen burning pot roast. TV Dad? He's chuckling to "Beetle Bailey" and puffing on a pipe that doesn't smoke.

TELLY: They shouldn't have to stop you.

MELISSA: That's what parents are for.

TELLY: How old are you?

MELISSA: Old enough.

TELLY: Fourteen-year-olds should know better.

MELISSA: I'm not fourteen. I'm twelve. (**MELISSA grabs the headphones and laptop. A giggle not her own.**) And if you don't mind, you can keep your laughs to yourself.

TELLY: I'm not laughing.

MELISSA: Who is?

(Another giggle. SHE tosses the laptop on the bed and follows with a belly-flop.)

HEDDY: (**riding it**) Wooooooooooooo! (**MELISSA looks at the headphones.**) Be careful, dear. I'm ticklish around the earpiece. (**MELISSA drops the headphones, startled. POOF! A cloud of smoke and HEDDY appears. SHE waves the smoke away with her earpiece.**) I have great flexibility, Melissa, but I would have a hard time convincing you that I'm a yo-yo, though I do have to say I enjoyed the ride over here.

MELISSA: Telly!

TELLY: I had nothing to do with it, doll. I swear.

HEDDY: Of course, not.

TELLY: Tell her.

HEDDY: It's me, Melissa ...Heddy ...

MELISSA: Heddy?

HEDDY: Well, if he's Telly, I have every right to be Heddy.

MELISSA: This is too, too freaky.

HEDDY: Well, it is a TV show.

MELISSA: I'm not on a TV show.

TELLY: Why is there a studio audience?

MELISSA: Hey!

HEDDY: Please be gentle with my volume. I'm recovering from bad lyrics.

MELISSA: What?

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