

00:00:00	Music	Music	Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.
00:00:01	Promo	Promo	<b>Speaker:</b> <i>Bullseye with Jesse Thorn</i> is a production of <a href="http://MaximumFun.org">MaximumFun.org</a> and is distributed by NPR.
			<i>[Music fades out.]</i>
00:00:12	Jesse Thorn	Host	I'm Jesse Thorn. It's <i>Bullseye</i> .
00:00:14	Music	Music	"Huddle Formation" from the album <i>Thunder, Lightning, Strike</i> by The Go! Team. A fast, upbeat, peppy song. Music plays as Jesse speaks, then fades out.
00:00:21	Jesse	Host	This week, we're listening back to some favorite interviews. Next up is Gregory Porter, from 2018. He's a Grammy Award nominated guest who's sold a bunch of albums and the route that he took to his singing career is unique. He was an offensive lineman in college. Then, during his junior year, an injury ended his football career. He knew he could sing, but he wasn't a singer. He hadn't really pursued it professionally. And that changed when his mom literally, from her deathbed, told him to start singing.
			He moved to New York with his brother and recorded 2010's <i>Water</i> , his debut album. And that's the other unique thing about his career. Whereas most young jazz singers start out recording standards, Porter recorded an album of mostly originals.
			<i>["Huddle Formation" ends and is replaced with "Magic Cup".]</i>
00:01:10	Music	Music	Like this song, "Magic Cup". "Magic Cup" from the album <i>Water</i> by Gregory Porter.
			<i>I just can't stop thinking about you All day long, I can't do without you You give me youth and taste of truth 'Cause you're my magic cup Every day in every way 'Cause you're my magic cup</i>
			<i>You are a good time Make me feel nice You are a perfect fix in the morning With sugar and spice</i>
			<i>You give me insight Into my mind Looking into your black mirror Before I pour you inside</i>
			<i>[Music fades out.]</i>
00:01:48	Jesse	Host	Porter has also done standards, like on 2017's <i>Nat King Cole &amp; Me</i> .
00:01:53	Music	Music	"Smile" from the album <i>Nat King Cole &amp; Me</i> by Gregory Porter.
			<i>Smile though your heart is aching Smile even though it's breaking When there are clouds in the sky, you'll get by If you smile though your fears and sorrow Smile and maybe tomorrow</i>

*You'll see the sun come shining through for you*

00:02:36	Jesse	Host	<p><i>[Music fades out as Jesse speaks.]</i> These days, he's got a new album. <i>All Rise</i> is a return to form for him—another compilation of originals.</p> <p><i>[Music fades in.]</i></p>
00:02:46	Music	Music	<p>Let's take a listen to a single off of it, called "Revival". "Revival" from the album <i>All Rise</i> by Gregory Porter.</p> <p><i>But you lift me higher Out of the fire Out of the flames I lost the feeling But you give me meaning again</i></p> <p><i>I'm singing revival (revival) Revival song (revival) I'm singing revival (revival)</i></p>
00:03:08	Jesse	Host	<p><i>[Music fades out as Jesse begins to talk.]</i> Gregory Porter, I am so happy to have you on <i>Bullseye</i>. Thank you so much for coming in here.</p>
00:03:12	Gregory Porter	Guest	<p>A real pleasure to be here, man. Thank you.</p>
00:03:14	Jesse	Host	<p><i>[Gregory agrees several times as Jesse speaks.]</i> So, you're in town from Bakersfield, where you live. And you, you know, you lived in Los Angeles when you were a young kid, but you kind of grew up in Bakersfield. I've spent a little bit of time in Bakersfield, lately. Because it's in between here and I have a cabin in the Sequoias, so I stop in Bakersfield. Get some ice cream at the Dewar's Candy Shop.</p>
00:03:37	Gregory	Guest	<p>Oh yeah! Okay. Now you're talking.</p>
00:03:39	Jesse	Guest	<p>But what's up with Bakersfield? Like, for people who just think maybe, like, Buck Owens or something?</p>
00:03:47	Gregory	Guest	<p><i>[Gregory agrees.]</i></p> <p>Or an oil derrick.</p> <p><i>[Chuckles.]</i> Right. And those things are, like, very important in Bakersfield. It's an agriculture community. It's a small community, yet it's—you know—it's over 400 thousand and it's quite spread out, now. There's a lot of new construction where the cotton fields use to be. My mother used to pick cotton when she was a little girl, there in Bakersfield. But Bakersfield is—I feel like it's a city in change, racially and politically. But it is a fascinating place. I just moved back there, after—you know... 20 years and I've been there for a couple years now, and I'm rediscovering a place that I was raised in. So, I'm still trying to figure out what it is, but in the meantime—in figuring out what it is, there's some extraordinary Mexican food.</p> <p><i>[Laughs.]</i> Which is, you know, in every corner and I love that. And... but it is still an agriculture-based—agriculture and oil is enormously important there. And it's—you know, lot of working-class people.</p> <p><i>[Gregory agrees several times as Jesse talks.]</i></p>

00:05:08 Jesse Host The feeling of Bakersfield is—you know, you're not very far from Los Angeles, you know. It's an hour, hour and a half away. And it's a big city of 400 thousand people, as you said. You are not surprised when you are there that it was, you know, the birthplace of a whole subgenre of country and western music, because it is... it's hot and the streets are wide and you can see a long way.

*[Gregory laughs.]*

00:05:43 Gregory Guest You know what I mean? Like, it has that open, dusty feeling. *[Laughing.]* Yeah. You know, it's funny. It is a thing. It's a transplantation of the South. It is. And the people that gravitated there—the agriculture that was—that found root there, a lot of the people—

*[Gregory agrees several times as Jesse talks.]*

00:06:06 Jesse Host 'Cause it's the start of the—of the Central Valley, essentially of California. Where, you know, whatever it is—45% of the produce in the United States is grown.

00:06:14 Gregory Guest Yeah. Yeah. And so, the Black population that came—they came for work. Texas, Louisiana, Arkansas. There was—you know, the migration that—from the South that went to the North, it went to Chicago and Detroit. But there was also that group of the family that came from Louisiana, Arkansas, Texas, you know—Mississippi, they came west. And Bakersfield was one of the places that they settled, because there was agriculture work.

The interesting thing, for me, is that I caught the last bit of the Black migrant workers—Black fieldworkers—who pitched watermelons and who cut watermelons, who picked fruit. That doesn't exist anymore, really. That population. And they had songs. They had culture. And I met those guys. My mother had a—essentially a rooming house where those guys stayed. And I hung out with them. And they were characters. Frenchie, Alley-Oop, Skullcat, Chief. And they were all these interesting characters, but they worked the fruit. They worked—they pitched watermelons. They don't even—I don't even know if they harvest the fruit like that, anymore. But it was a line of men who pitched the fruit. *[Chuckles.]*

00:07:44 Jesse Host Your mom was a minister, a preacher, both in Los Angeles—when you were young—and when you were a little older and a teenager, in Bakersfield.

*[Gregory hums in agreement.]*

00:07:55 Gregory Guest What kind of church did she preach in? It's The Church of God and Christ, which is a off-shoot of—you know—it's a Holiness, a Pentecostal, you know. For her, what was important was going directly to the people. She was a street minister. And her establishments were always called missions, because—first of all, she had a mission and she wanted her places of worship to be a place where people could come, in any condition. So, consequently, we—all of the houses of worship that we had were storefront churches. They were—and what I mean by that was, like, not a purpose-built church. It's—this was—this was, maybe, I think the first one we had on Lakeview Avenue, in Bakersfield, was... a café converted into a church. You know, we

00:08:57 Jesse Host built an altar and put a big air conditioner in there and there we go. There's—put some chairs. That's the church!  
I imagine your family must have been central to a church, given how big it was.

*[Gregory agrees and laughs.]*

00:09:07 Gregory Guest It must have been—*[chuckles]* your brothers and sisters and your mom, you know.  
00:09:08 Jesse Host We started—  
Setting up the concession stand and passing out the collection plates and...  
00:09:13 Gregory Guest You already start off with a congregation, you know? You got eight kids *[chuckling]* and that's your—you already got a choir, you know? And...  
00:09:22 Jesse Host I imagine you also, though, already have somebody to sweep up afterwards and—

*[Gregory agrees.]*

00:09:27 Gregory Guest Everybody pitches in.  
We were her work—we were her crew. It was—you know, it was a family—it was a family thing. And we didn't—we didn't realize it. It was like, "Okay. Church is the family business. Real estate is the family business. Singing is the family business." You don't—but you don't do it. It's just like, "This is what we grew up doing!"

But she had a conviction on her life, and we kind of all had to follow. And we thought it was normal until we realized, "Okay, nobody else really picks up homeless people off the streets and take them home." Like we did. I remember my friends coming over, sometimes, and they're like, "Who's that man?!"

And it's like, "This is—" You know, my mother would have projects. She would—she would—she would redeem—try to redeem people. And she would meet people and if they seemed like a—like good people that just had fallen down for some reason, they were coming to the house and my mother was gonna clean them up and was gonna, you know, give them good food and was gonna get them physically and mentally—try to get them back on their feet. And there were so many of those episodes. And so, from that comes a song from me called, you know, "Take Me to the Alley". The alley is a real street, in Bakersfield. It's Lakeview Avenue, Cottonwood Road. The Road is what they used to call it. That's where she started her ministry, in a way. It was the worst street. It was the street that had the most problems, the most drugs, the most people stumbling around and in the daze of life.

And she would go to those people. Those are the first people that I sang to. I'm, you know—the Royal Albert Hall and Hollywood Bowl is amazing, but really, the first people that confirmed me were people that had a bottle of wine in their hand. Thunderbird. Night Train. And they confirmed me by saying, *[gravelly]* "Yeah, baby, you got something!" You know. And that—and the funny thing is, is it meant something to me, then: singing to them out on... the street corner. It sounds like a romantic, made-up story. But the—you

know, yeah. That's what—that's what we—she was like, "Let's—" We would have a church service outdoors, on the sidewalk.

*[Music fades in.]*

She wanted to be where the people were. Take me to the alley. Yeah.

00:11:46 Jesse Host  
00:11:48 Music Music

Well, let's hear that song.  
"Take Me to the Alley" from the album *Take Me to the Alley* by Gregory Porter.

*Take me to the alley  
Take me to the afflicted ones  
Take me to the lonely ones  
That somehow lost their way*

*Let them hear me say  
I am your friend  
Come to my table  
Rest here in my garden  
You will have a pardon*

00:12:43 Jesse Host

*[Music fades out as Jesse begins talking.]*  
You went to college on a football scholarship.

*[Gregory confirms several times as Jesse speaks.]*

00:12:59 Gregory Guest

And got hurt almost right away. And couldn't play football anymore. Did you, at the time that you got hurt, did you think of yourself as a football player? Like, was that the top thing in your identity? Yeah. Yeah. That's, um... the self-identity, especially when you're on a college campus—you know, *[chucking and stammering]* at—and especially at San Diego State, you plopped onto a campus with 30 thousand students, and—you know—who are you and what are you? That—yeah, that was my identity. I walked around with, you know, with Aztec gear and, you know, things that signified I was—I was on the team. And—

00:13:29 Jesse Host

*[Gregory agrees several times as Jesse talks.]*  
And there was no—*[chuckling]* I mean, you're a big man sitting in front of me right now.

*[Gregory laughs.]*

00:13:45 Gregory Guest

I think you—I imagine you cut a figure. You're a lineman, that was what I'm saying. We're not talking about a little tailback, here. Yeah, this was my—this was my identity, and—but... the funny thing is, is I think everything happens for a reason. I injured my shoulder early in my athletic career, in college. And so, you're left without that self-identity. I mean, I couldn't run without my shoulder shaking around in its socket, so I was like—you know, and after—you know, months and months of therapy, it didn't get any better. And then—you know, I was like, "Okay, so I'm not an athlete anymore. What is my identity?" And I went right back to—this is—yes, I was a—I was a student, but this—what's the extra thing? What's the—what's the other thing, you know?

And I went back to my first love—my original love. The one—the thing that was really always there throughout anything, and that was—that was music. And I started to immerse myself in that and immerse myself in the music of Nat King Cole. I went to the music listening library, at San Diego State. And I just checked out just a stack of Nat’s records. And I listened and I relistened. And it brought me back to my childhood. It brought me back to my mother, the environment of my home as a—as a child. And... it was—it was really something. Self-medicating with music. ‘Cause at the same time I injured myself, I had found that my mother was... dying of breast cancer that had spread throughout her body. And so, I needed some pick-me-up. I needed some smile. I needed some, you know, pretend you’re happy when you’re blue. I needed these songs—powerful encouragement and even escapism, I needed it. And I—and I found it in Nat’s music. Again. *[Chuckles.]*

00:15:47 Jesse Host

*[Gregory agrees several times as Jesse talks.]*

I mean, to me the incredible thing about Nat King Cole’s records is... you know, he’s so profoundly elegant as a—as a musician, as a man, as well. I mean, a gorgeous guy. But a man for whom, you know—his career as a Black entertainer who was working in the—you know, broad pop music world, in the early 1950s. You know, he was very unusual, in that. His manner is characterized by, kind of, forbearance. You know? Like, all of those—all of those slings and arrows are translated into a feeling of, like, “No matter what... I am transcendent.”

*[Beat.]*

It’s something that is, like, awe inspiring about him. You know, it’s also—I think, for a lot of people, it’s the thing that they... least connect with, about him. Because they wish he was mad about it. You know?

00:16:59 Gregory Guest

*[Chuckles.]* Nat, for me—you know, people talk about, “What—I don’t—did he—was he expressing himself in a... in a way that it advanced, you know, Black people?” You know, you can—you could say that just by checking out some of the things that he... you know, how forceful was he? Was he on the frontlines of—and marching? Just his being there—his eloquence, his genius—Nat—this is the thing. Nat knew exactly who he was. He was the darkest of dark. He knew exactly who he was, and he knew he was—you know—there was a perception of the perceived threat in his Blackness. But he took it and he graced it so beautifully. And even—it had even effected some of the songs that he chose to sing: the idea of singing love songs to love. Love songs to humanity. Universal love. “Smile”. “Nature Boy”. “Pick Yourself Up”. This type of song in a way is uniquely connected to him, because they’re love songs to love and to life.

And that has profoundly affected me. But, in a way, it was a thing that he—in some way—had to do, because—you know—swooning after Nat King Cole was not a popular thing for, you know, many parents and many people’s minds, at the time. You know, in some ways I called him the—you know, original Barack Obama, because he knew who he was and he knew how he had to, you know,

traverse this world. And he knew he had to do it with grace, and he did. And he still got his message across. Now, I think about—you know—people think about his lyrics and his—and like, “Oh, he’s—you know, he’s in the sky and he’s, you know, he’s just so—you know, milquetoast and sweet.”

But think about a song like “Pick Yourself Up” and dust yourself off and start all over again. Think about that song for somebody who had been pushed down, who had been mistreated, who had been punched or kicked or bitten in the civil rights struggle. “Pick yourself up. Dust yourself off. Start all over again,” means something totally different to them. Totally different. It means something totally different to my mother. “Smile though your heart is aching,” means something totally different to her. You know. To the people that are underneath, to the people who have been pushed down, many of Nat’s songs mean something totally different! It’s encouragement. It’s optimism.

And so, when we talk about his contribution to people that are on the underneath, you absolutely have to consider these lyrics that I hear now and that still fortify people. You have to think of that. So, he had a—he had a great contribution. You know, first Black man to have his own television show and—you know, just the experiment of that [*chuckles*] was really something extraordinary for—you know—for an American culture that wasn’t—wasn’t so open to that. You know?

00:20:45 Jesse Host

Well, let’s hear my guest—Gregory Porter—singing “Pick Yourself Up”.

*[Music fades in.]*

00:20:55 Music Music

His most recent record is called *Nat King Cole & Me*. “Pick Yourself Up” from the album *Nat King Cole & Me* by Gregory Porter.

*Pick yourself up  
Take a deep breath  
Dust yourself off  
Start all over again*

*Nothing’s impossible, I have found  
For when my chin is on the ground  
I pick myself up  
Dust myself off  
And start all over again*

00:21:23 Jesse Host

*[Music fades out as Jesse begins to speak.]*

Even more with Gregory Porter. Don’t go anywhere. After a short break, his voice gets compared to Bill Withers pretty frequently. He’ll tell me what he thinks about that. This show is *Bullseye*, from [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and NPR.

00:21:36 Promo Promo

*[The sound of radio static punctuates the conversation, overlaid by a distant, ringing note.]*

**Rocket Ship One:** Mission control, this is rocket ship one. Come in mission control.

**Mission Control:** This is mission control. Go ahead.

**Rocket Ship One:** We have incoming and it looks big.

**Mission Control:** Can you identify?

**Rocket Ship One:** It looks like—*[the beep of electronics]* some sort of pledge drive. Affirmative. It's MaxFun Drive.

*[The clicking of a keyboard.]*

**Mission Control:** That's a verified MaxFun Drive. Countdown to MaxFun Drive is initiated. Can you project a time to intercept?

**Rocket Ship One:** Based on the current trajectory, MaxFun Drive will be here from March 16 to March 27.

*[The clicking of a keyboard.]*

**Mission Control:** March 16 to March 27, Rodger. Rocket ship one, can you confirm a visual on common MaxFun Drive phenomena, such as the best episodes of the year? Bonus content and special gifts for new and upgrading monthly members?

*[The beeping of an electronic readout.]*

**Rocket Ship One:** We have a visual. Great episodes, bonus content, premium gifts confirmed. And more. It sure sounds quiet down there. Mission control, what's your status?

**Mission Control:** All systems go, rocket ship one! Just catching up on our favorite MaxFun shows so we can tune into MaxFun Drive episodes between March 16 and March 27. Over and out.

*[The clicking stutter of communication being cut off.]*

00:22:38    Promo            Promo

**Music:** Otherworldly music.

**Speaker 1:** On a secret military recording, a sound so haunting, one scientist believed it could change the world.

**Speaker 2:** My mind was racing as I listened to this. And I thought, "This—this is the way."

**Speaker 1:** Join NPR's *Invisibilia* for the first episode of our new season.

*[Music fades out.]*

00:22:58    Music            Music  
00:23:00    Jesse            Host

Swelling, orchestral music. It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest, Gregory Porter, is one of the best-selling jazz singers alive today. He's also a prolific songwriter. He has a new album coming out later this spring, called *All Rise*. Here's another track from it. It's called "If Love is Overrated".

00:23:15    Music            Music

"If Love is Overrated" from the album *All Rise* by Gregory Porter.

*If love is overrated  
Let me be the one that is naïve  
If love is overrated  
Let me be the one that is deceived*

*Let me find that your hands are that are touching me  
Is not the hand that's supposed to be  
Your lips, an illusion  
Let me be the only fool for your embrace  
Let me fall upon my face  
I like this strange illusion*

*[Music fades out as Jesse speaks.]*

00:24:06 Jesse Host I hear you often compared to Bill Withers. You know, Bill Withers is... you know, maybe my favorite ever.

*[They chuckle.]*

00:24:13 Crosstalk Crosstalk **Gregory:** Yeah.

**Jesse:** Of any—of anything. So...

**Gregory:** I'm always just like—be careful with those comparisons, I'm not—I'm a child and that's a—you know. That's—I'm—that's the grandpa, you know.

*[Gregory agrees several times as Jesse talks.]*

00:24:21 Jesse Host And, you know, I've spoken to him a couple of times. And he's a—you know, he's a brilliant... brilliant man, in general, not just musically. And one of the things that I think ties your art and his is that both of you were men when you... in earnest, kicked off your careers. You know, Bill Withers had sung in the navy, but he was a—he was a career, in the navy. You know, he didn't—he didn't put out his first record 'til he was about 30.

You were in your late 30s when you put out your first record. And that is a very different perspective on the world than the perspective of... you know, even when it's about falling in love, it's about a different kind of falling in love than when you're 16. No offense of when you're 16, that's also great.

00:25:18 Gregory Guest Yeah. *[Laughs.]* But I didn't know what to say when I was 16 and 17 and 18. I think—you know, having life seasoning and ups and downs can inform your art. Blam! There's some power and energy, you know, youth can give to music, but there's also some power and energy and wisdom that life experience can bring to music. I hear it in Bill Withers' music, and sometimes—when I divorce myself from myself and I hear my music on a radio show or when somebody else is explaining it to me, I'm like, "Ah, yeah. Yeah. There is a depth that's—you know, has a little bit—you know, than what you might hear from a—from a 17-year-old. You know. The world of music consists of ears that are 9 years old and that are 90 years old.

And so, we've gotta have something for everybody and for every life experience. And the ups and downs of love. All love is not this love that you experience at 22. And that's a great love, but you know, when you're 22 you think you know it all. And then you become 32

and you're like, "Woow, I knew nothing when I was 22." And then when you're 42, you're like, "Woow, I knew nothing when I was 32 and when I was 22." You understand what I'm saying? So, I think *[laughing]* that music has to grow as well. And... yeah, I think life experience and going through the ups and downs of all of it—racism has informed my music. Mistreatment, discrimination. The ups and downs of love. Being dumped can inform the music. Success can inform the music. You know. Feeling, having a triumph—whatever—in whatever field can find its way into the music. Beauty, nature. You know. Just having visited many beautiful vistas, that can be something you can sing about, or even secretly put into the music. And it doesn't even—you're not even speaking of beautiful sunrises, but the inspiration is in the music. That's something. You know. Yeah.

00:27:40 Jesse Host

Well, Gregory Porter, I am so grateful to you that you came in and took all this time to be on the show. And I'm grateful to you for you, in your cocktail cuffs, tolerating the fact that I'm here in sandals—sport sandals, no less!

*[Gregory laughs.]*

00:28:05 Gregory Guest

It's hot outside, in Los Angeles! You got on a nice scarf! You're accessorized, in here!  
Yeah, no, it's nice, man. You know, I had my concert last night, so that's all I have is concert clothes.

*[Jesse cackles.]*

So, this is what you get, baby. *[Laughs.]*

00:28:13 Jesse Host  
00:28:14 Gregory Guest  
00:28:16 Music Music

*[Music fades in.]*

Well, thank you very much, Gregory.

Yeah, thank you. Real pleasure.

"L-O-V-E" from the album *Nat King Cole & Me* by Gregory Porter.

*L is for the way you look at me*

*O is for the only one I see*

*V is very, very extraordinary*

*E is even more than anyone that you adore can*

*Love...*

00:28:34 Jesse Host

*[Music volume decreases as Jesse speaks.]*

Gregory Porter. Watch for his album, *All Rise*. It's coming out next month. Now is a perfect time to get acquainted with his earlier albums. One that's particularly wonderful is 2016's *Take Me to the Alley*.

00:28:47 Music Music

*[The music fades back in.]*

*... don't break it*

*Love was made for me and you*

00:28:54 Music Music  
00:28:58 Jesse Host

*[Music fades out.]*

Jazzy transition music.

That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye* is produced at [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) world headquarters, overlooking MacArthur

Park in beautiful Los Angeles, California—where firefighters came and shot their hoses into the lake! From their big, tall ladders! I guess MacArthur park is the ideal venue for big, tall ladder hose spraying exercise.

The show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our producer is Kevin Ferguson. Jesus Ambrosio is our associate producer. We get help from Casey O'Brien. Our production fellow is Jordan Kawling. Our interstitial music is by Dan Wally, also known as DJW. Our theme song is by The Go! Team. Thanks to them and their label, Memphis Industries, for letting us use it.

And, one last thing: we have done many, many, maaany interviews in the show's nearly two decades. If you're a jazz fan, why not check out our interview with Kamasi Washington? Or our conversation with Terrace Martin? We're also on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Just search for *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn*. You can keep up with the show there.

And I think that's about it. Just remember: all great radio hosts have a signature sign off.

00:30:07    Promo            Promo

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

*[Music fades out.]*