

00:00:00	Music	Transition	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.
00:00:11	Jesse Thorn	Host	<i>[Music fades out.]</i> I'm Jesse Thorn. It's <i>Bullseye</i> .
00:00:14	Music	Transition	"Huddle Formation" from the album <i>Thunder, Lightning, Strike</i> by The Go! Team plays. A fast, upbeat, peppy song. Music plays as Jesse speaks, then fades out.
00:00:21	Jesse	Host	So. This week, we are coming to you from my home office, in Los Angeles, about a week into self-isolation. We figured now is as good a time as any to look back at some of our favorite <i>Bullseye</i> interviews.  <i>[Music ends.]</i>  So, a 2018 conversation with the great Boots Riley. Boots is, hands down, one of the most interesting people making art today. Among other things, he's the front man of The Coup, one of my favorite rap groups of all time. The Coup make straightforward music. The beats never had a lot of frills. Boots, when he raps, does so plainly. But the central element of The Coup is its message. Boots told stories, when he rapped: painted pictures from his real life. He talked about social justice and poverty and racism.  <i>[Music fades in.]</i>  A lot of hip-hop is about prosperity, overcoming a system that's been rigged against you for centuries. Success stories, in other words. The Coup—with Boots as the front man—want to the throw the system out entirely.
00:01:22	Music	Music	"Ghetto Manifesto" from the album <i>Party Music</i> by The Coup.  <i>This is my resume slash resignation A ransom note with proposed legislation A fevered ultimatum, you should take it verbatim 'Cause I got two bangin' pieces and you don't wanna date 'em Flyin' kites for my folks at home</i>
00:01:33	Jesse	Host	<i>[Music fades out as Jesse speaks.]</i> About eight years ago, Boots started working on a movie—something he'd never really done before. He started telling friends about it, asking acquaintances in the industry for advice. Sometimes he'd just corner a movie producer for 15 minutes. He wrote a screenplay, and thanks to a combination of audacity, determination, and luck, he actually made the movie.  It's called <i>Sorry to Bother You</i> . It's set in Oakland, in a kind of alternate reality. Lakeith Stanfield is the star. He plays Cassius Green, a black man who gets a gig doing telemarketing. And it's in that job that he finds the key to success: do a dead-on impression of a white dude and magically people listen when you call. From that point forth, it gets weirder. Much weirder. If you've seen <i>Sorry to Bother You</i> , you know what I mean. But if you haven't, I don't

wanna spoil anything for you. I'll just say that it has elements of sci-fi and horror and more.

But it's great! It's an instant classic. Let's take a listen to a little bit from the beginning of the movie. Here, Cassius is just getting started in telemarketing and he can't seem to get the time of day on the phone. And in this scene, he gets some advice from a veteran coworker, played by Danny Glover.

00:02:46 Sound Effect Transition

Music swells and fades.

00:02:47 Clip Clip

**Music:** Surreal music with light vocalizations plays softly in the background.

*[The sounds of other people shuffling around the office.]*

**Langston:** Well, you don't talk white enough. And I'm not talking about Will Smith white. That ain't white, that's just proper. I'm talking about the real deal.

**Cassius Green:** Okay, so, like—*[voice changing to a nasally, younger inflection, clearly played by an entirely different actor]* Hello, Mr. Everett! Cassius Green, here! Sorry to bother you!

**Langston:** *[Stammering.]* Look, you got it wrong. I'm not talking about sounding all nasal. It's like, sounding like you don't have a care. Got your bills paid. You're happy about your future. You're about ready to jump in your Ferrari, out there, after you get off this call. Put some real breath in there! Breezy, like, "I don't really need this money." You've never been fired! *[Chuckles.]* Only laid off. It's not really a white voice. It's what they wish they sounded like. It's like what they think they're supposed to sound like. Yeah. Like this, young blood. *[In an overly cheerful, easy tone, voiced by a different actor.]* Hey, Mr. Kramer! This is Langston from Regalview. I didn't catch you at the wrong time, did I?

00:03:47 Sound Effect Transition

Music swells and fades.

00:03:49 Jesse Host  
00:03:51 Boots Riley Guest

Boots Riley, welcome back to the show. It's nice to see you. *[Chuckles.]* Good seeing you too, man.

00:03:53 Jesse Host

*[Boots agrees several times as Jesse speaks.]*  
I feel like the last time you were on the show, it was—I think it was a live show in San Francisco. And... that was a long time ago! I'll say six or seven years ago. Anyway. And you were working on this movie. This was, like, *[laughs]*—um, what—why did you even think—how did you get the temerity to think that you, a grown man with a full career in another field—you know, a 20 year, 25 year career in another field—could change lanes like this?

00:04:28 Boots Guest

Uh, well, I guess it's because when I decided I was going to rap, I didn't know how to rap, either. You know?

00:04:36 Jesse Host

But I mean—the difference—

*[Boots chuckles.]*

00:04:43 Boots Guest

The difference is, like, when you decided—when you decided you were—you were gonna rap, you were 17 or whatever. Or 15. Nah, I was like—yeah, 19 or 20 or something like that.

00:04:46	Jesse	Host	Yeah, so, everybody thinks they can do everything then they're 19! <i>[Laughs.]</i>
00:04:49	Boots	Guest	I still think I can do everything. But I don't think I have the time to figure it out for everything. But, yeah, I—I think because of that career, the idea that I know that there are steps to figure out with how to do things—I've done things that are hard, before. You know? So. I knew this. But I also—I started out in film school, before I was known as a musician. I went to San Francisco State, but we got a record deal in the middle of that. And so, I was out of there quick.
00:05:24	Jesse	Host	Shout out to all the Golden Gators out there.
00:05:26	Boots	Guest	Yeah. <i>[Chuckles.]</i> And, uh, yeah. And so... it was probably easier for me, having done a career in art. And also, you know, I've been around music video sets. I know people who've made films in different ways. And so, being an artist has made me honest with myself about my strengths and weaknesses. And honest with myself about what I do know and what I don't know. So, I was able to identify those things and go out and find it and meet Guillermo del Toro at a luncheon and corner him and hound him until he gave me all the information I needed. Or to get David Gordon Green to be a mentor and let me shadow him on—when he went and shot stuff.
			So, you know, when you—if someone that has built a house tells you they're gonna... build a boat, you'll believe them. Because they actually did something they said they were gonna do. And so, that helped me.
00:06:29	Jesse	Host	That's interesting. I—you know, I was thinking about the beginning of The Coup's career. And, you know, I caught on as a teenager, a few years in. You already had a record deal, and stuff. But when you got a record deal, it was basically the only time in the history of hip-hop that lots of artists from the Bay Area—lots of urban music artists from the Bay Area were getting big record deals.
00:06:55	Boots	Guest	Mm-hm. Yeah, we were in the right place at the right time.
00:06:58	Jesse	Host	It was like, MC Hammer had happened. MC Hammer had changed the face of hip-hop.
			<i>[Boots agrees.]</i>
00:07:05	Boots	Guest	Coming from Oakland. And— Digital Underground was a bit part of that.
			<i>[Jesse agrees.]</i>
00:07:07	Jesse	Host	They had a big hit.
00:07:09	Boots	Guest	Exactly. And there was—there was Digital Underground.
00:07:10	Jesse	Host	Too Short.
			There was Too Short. There was these other kind of corollary things.
00:07:13	Boots	Guest	And what—a thing about business, especially entertainment and the music business, is people are not creative. So, they're, like, "This worked. We don't know what the hell happened. But we do know that these three groups were from Oakland. So, got any more Oakland groups?!"
00:07:32	Jesse	Host	I think a lot about this novelty record by the country novelty band, Riders in the Sky, who were like a band that you would—they're

very lovely and charming, but they're like a band you would see at a state fair.

*[Boots affirms.]*

And—or maybe on *A Prairie Home Companion* or something. And I had this tape of theirs, as a kid, that had this running joke where somebody would say, “Has it been done before?” And the other guy would say, “Yeah, sure! Millions of times!” And then the business guy would say, “Great! We know it works!”

*[Boots chuckles.]*

And like—but what's wild about it, to me, is that... you know, you certainly couldn't have been more divergent, aesthetically, from Hammer.

*[Boots agrees.]*

00:08:18 Boots Guest

I mean, I like Hammer. I have no beef with Hammer. But, like—Yeah! We're very different from everybody. I mean, we—I think our first review that came out was by Danielle Smith, who then went on to be the editor of *Essence*, but then was just writing for *The Bay Guardian*. And she was like, “Sounds like Boots Riley is trying to find his style.” And I think you could apply that to everything I do, right now. And what she meant by that was there was no place to plug us in. Like, “Oh, you like this group? You'll love this. You'll love The Coup.” It was hard to do that. And it was only because Stu Fine at Wild Pitch was—is a... crazy dude.

*[Jesse laughs.]*

And he—he may or may not have been able to capitalize to the best of his abilities on these groups that he signed, but he signed some amazing groups. Like Gang Starr and Main Source and, you know, all of these groups that... other rappers love, but may not have—you know—while they were on Wild Pitch, flourished as much.

So, we got found out by that label and it was just kind of lucky for us.

00:09:40 Jesse Host

Let's hear one of the records. This was, like—I mean, in some ways, this was like one of the closest things to a hit you had in the very early part of your career. This is from your second album, *Genocide & Juice*, from 1994. And it's called “Fat Cats, Bigga Fish”.

00:09:55 Music Music

“Fat Cats, Bigga Fish” from the album *Genocide & Juice* by The Coup.

*It's almost 10 o'clock, see.  
I gotta ball of lint for property  
So, I slip my beanie on sloppily  
And promenade out to take up a collection  
I got game like I read the directions  
I'm wishing that I had an automobile  
As I feel the cold wind rush past  
But let me state that I'm a hustler for real*

00:10:10 Jesse Host *[Music fades out as Jesse talks.]*  
That's a story song. It's a great story song. And it seemed like you were—you were very deeply committed, from the beginning, to that idea of narrative. That's not to say that all Coup songs are narrative at all.

*[Boots agrees.]*

00:10:25 Boots Guest  
Like, it was relatively few of them.  
No, I love—it's just that I love that. One, I wanted to be a filmmaker. So, the idea of being able to make someone see a film in their head while they're listening to the song was like, "Cool. This is much cheaper than making a movie." So, that excited me. I also, obviously, was very influenced by Slick Rick and Ice Cube things like that. So, those were heroes. And wanted to do that, as well. But yeah. I—story has always been a big part of things, to me. And I think that's how—you know—as an—meeting some organizers through my life, growing up, the really effective ones were sometimes these very longwinded people, who told a lot of personal stories that made you understand the concept.

00:11:23 Jesse Host  
I mean, my dad was a professional organizer for most of his life. And—he's still alive, he's just retired—and goodness knows, I went to plenty of events and protests and so on and so forth when I was a kid, with him. And I think that narrative is a really essential part of organizing. Not just in terms of one's own personal story, although that can be a really important part of it. But anytime you're trying to share a message, putting it in the context of a story—whether it's the story of an event, you know—I was just thinking of—my dad's best friend helped organize a protest in favor of—or a demonstration in favor of the Americans with Disabilities Act, which was a bunch of folks who were partially paralyzed, took their wheelchairs up to the stairs in front of congress and got out of their wheelchairs and dragged themselves up the stairs. Right?

That's a story that they are telling.

*[Boots agrees.]*

00:12:33 Boots Guest  
And that's why it's such a—so compelling that these—you know, it's only, whatever, 15 people. But that's what makes it such—so powerful.  
Yeah. It's being able to cause empathy in the person that you're talking to. Which allows them to see an analysis of the world, through your eyes. And so—and also, just—I'm just a fan of storytelling and I'm a fan of, like, that story has—you know, it starts off one way and goes a whole different direction. So, I always was a fan of taking people on that journey and taking those journeys, myself.

00:13:07 Jesse Host *[Boots agrees several times as Jesse talks.]*  
You know, like, "Fat Cats, Bigga Fish", which is a story about some folks essentially getting together to rob rich people at a party. And it is, tonally—you know, this is something that you made in—25 years ago. It tonally, really reminds me of *Sorry to Bother You*.

*[Boots makes a sound of surprise.]*

Like there's, you know—*Sorry to Bother You* gets more intense than “Fat Cats, Bigga Fish” does. *[Chuckles.]* It gets really intense. But it has the same kind of free-wheeling, satirical quality that also encompasses—you know, kind of recognition of real humanity. And visual stuff, too. I mean, like, in that song is one of my favorite stanzas in a hip-hop record, ever. Which is—I would leave it to you to say, because I'm no rapper. You'll be surprised to learn.

*[Boots chuckles.]*

00:14:09	Boots	Guest	But it's about the streetlight and the ground. “The streetlight reflects off the piss off the ground, which reflects off the hamburger sign. Turn around. Which reflects off the chrome of the BMW. Which reflects off the fact that I'm broke. Now, what the <i>[censored]</i> is new?”
00:14:20	Jesse	Host	Right. And that is very plain. I mean, it's not like—it's not fancy.

*[Boots agrees.]*

00:14:30	Boots	Guest	You know what I mean? There's nothing fancy about it. It's intensely visual. Dave Eggar school of writing.
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*[Jesse agrees with a chuckle.]*

00:15:19	Jesse	Host	Um, yeah. It's—yeah. That's the thing is that—I mean, painting a picture. I, you know—for me, it's hard to talk about those things, 'cause I kind of don't know what I'm doing. You know. The whole time. I'm trying to find something to do and the stuff that really works. I could try to break it down and be like, “This is why it works!” But you don't really know. You don't really—you know, you have ideas and those ideas keep you going, but you know. I think once I—I worry that once I try to start qualifying exactly what I'm doing, that's when, you know, I'll get too in my head and not be able to do those things. The first time you—I interviewed you for this show was, I don't know, a long time ago... let's say... 15 years ago, maybe?
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*[Boots affirms several times.]*

00:16:05	Boots	Guest	And we talked about the rappers who influenced you. You really talked a lot about Ice Cube, who I think is—you know—it makes a lot of sense, 'cause Cube is funny and kind of plain and humane and he's also, like, ferocious. And, you know, I thought of Too Short, who raps about completely different stuff than what you rap about most of the time, but also has that kind of plain quality—like, it's declamatory, you know what I mean?
00:16:06	Jesse	Host	And that's something that— It's like an announcement.
00:16:07	Boots	Guest	Yeah. And that's something—yeah, there's songs that we have that are influenced by some of that style. And some of that is a little bit more of an identity thing for me, 'cause I'm in Oakland. So, okay, let me do something that's like that much—like, there might be a jazz musician from Mexico City that's like, “Okay, now we're gonna do something that's Rancho style.” Or whatever.

*[Jesse agrees.]*

You know. And, you know, so I definitely have—

- 00:16:41 Jesse Host *[Boots agrees several times as Jesse talks.]*  
It's like a piece of who you are! I mean, I—even as a guy from San Francisco, like, I feel like there are these artists who are so deeply tied to where I'm from, that they feel like a part of me. You know, I'm like—Rappin' 4-Tay went to my high school, you know what I mean? Like, that's like—it just means everything, that thing. But what I wonder is, at the time that The Coup was coming out—you know, Bay Area hip-hop and especially independent Bay Area hip-hop was moving at a much more abstract kind of super lyrical direction.
- 00:17:14 Boots Guest Hm. Really?  
00:17:15 Jesse Host Yeah, I mean there's plenty of—I mean—  
00:17:16 Crosstalk Crosstalk **Boots:** Oh, like—
- Jesse:** There was—there was a—
- Boots:** Uh, like High Road? Yeah, yeah.
- Jesse:** There was, yeah. I mean there was also—you know, there was also a lane of, you know—mob music was really flourishing at the time, too.
- 00:17:25 Jesse Host **Boots:** Mm-hm. Yeah.  
But, you know, there's all this kind of High Road—you know, Souls and Dell and all this stuff that was super lyrical, and you never became super lyrical, and I wonder if you ever aspire—if you ever thought, like, “Maybe I should make, like—maybe I should focus on, like, developing crazy styles”?
- 00:17:42 Boots Guest Yeah. So, to me, yeah, I—yeah, 'cause I don't—to me, I think of them more as style purveyors.
- [Jesse agrees several times.]*
- 00:17:58 Crosstalk Crosstalk And, to me, like—super lyrical is like Nas. Or something like that. Which is different. And I definitely have aspired to...  
**Jesse:** That.
- Boots:** That sort of thing.
- 00:18:00 Boots Guest **Jesse:** The Nas thing.  
But the... High Road, they kind of had this style that felt really lively and... actually got picked up a lot by—is—influenced hip-hop in more ways than people think about. I was talking to André 3000 the other day, and him talking about how much Souls of Mischief influenced them. You know? And I just dropped a big name, but that's cool. And—
- 00:18:26 Jesse Host *[He chuckles as Jesse talks.]*  
No, that was, like, the best anecdote you possibly could have told me. Like, you really couldn't have hit a bigger homerun with that

00:18:36 Boots Guest namedrop in this room. I don't know how NPR listeners feel about that, but—  
 And there was a big thing that came out of Oakland that influenced a lot of style. But, in my head—so, in the movie, Cassius Green is go—has this existential crisis that is there and I'm always in the midst of that. And I'm... a lot of times, writing my stuff thinking about people listening to it 100 years from now. And although there's no way to predict how that will be looked at, I am also thinking about how it's read. You know. So, for me, it's not just a—it's not just an auditory thing.

00:19:22 Jesse Host I wanna play a little bit of another great story record that you made. And this maybe is the one that I feel the most strongly about. And it's called "Me and Jesus the Pimp in '79 Granada Last Night".

*[Music fades in.]*

00:19:43 Music Music And this is from my guest, Boots Riley's group, The Coup's album that came out in 1998, *Steal this Album*.  
 "Me and Jesus the Pimp in a '79 Granada Last Night" from the album *Steal this Album* by The Coup.

*City lights from far away can make  
 You drop your jaw  
 Sparklin' like sequins on a  
 Transvestite at Mardi Gras  
 There's beauty in the cracks of the cement  
 When I was five, I hopped over them  
 Wherever we went to prevent  
 Whatever it was that could break my momma's back  
 Little did I know that it would roll up in a Cadillac  
 And matter-of-fact, she couldn't see him  
 Like a cataract  
 And on the track, she went from beautiful  
 To battle axe  
 And back at home, she would cry into her pillow  
 Vomit in the commode*

*[Music fades out as Jesse speaks.]*

00:20:08 Jesse Host This is a story about a young man whose dad gets out of jail and they go for a drive together. And it's also—I mean, I think the first time I heard that song... I mean, 1998, so I was 17. And I think I heard it—it was right when the record—the record came out, and I happened to be in this class with this guy, Rickey Vincent, who teaches at San Francisco State.

00:20:36 Boots Guest

Mm-hm. Uhuru Maggot.

00:20:38 Jesse Host

Yeah, the Uhuru Maggot from KPFA radio, in Berkley. And this class was not a hip-hop class, but this song came out and he was like, "This record just came out, you gotta hear this." And I remember sitting in this class—I'm 17. I'm surrounded by college students. I'm a junior in high school. And I'm just sitting there with all of these people who are, like, as far as I'm concerned, the coolest people in the world. 'Cause they're all 21.

*[Boots agrees with a chuckle.]*



And I was just crying, listening to this story. And because the story was so transporting—I think it took me a while to absorb its sort of allegorical content. *[Beat.]* You know, it becomes a story about the young man’s mother and his relationship with his parents. And, ultimately, I don’t know if songs can have spoiler alerts, Boots. But it came out a long time ago!

00:21:36 Boots Guest  
00:21:38 Jesse Host

*[Laughing.]* Yeah, yeah. Yeah, you don’t need a spoiler alert for it. Ultimately, he kills his father.

*[Boots confirms.]*

And I wonder what you were thinking about when you were writing that song.

00:21:46 Boots Guest

Honestly, this is probably one of my most, like, masturbatory sort of things.

*[Jesse laughs.]*

Because I was just like, “I wanna write a good story. I want there to be all sorts of little things that you, you know, catch up on.” Like, there’s—you know—so, it was probably—

00:22:03 Jesse Host

I think it was, like, five years after this song came out that I talked to you about it the first time and you’re like, “Oh, you know, “79 Granada”, that’s because that’s when the revolution was, in Granada.”

00:22:10 Boots Guest

Yeah, yeah. Well, that’s what I thought. But this is—when I wrote it, I really didn’t have access to the internet. So, it was really ’81 that it happened.

*[Jesse affirms.]*

And, uh, *[laughs]* but yeah. So. That is—yeah, I have all sorts of little things in there that probably people won’t pick up on unless they’re really nerding out on it. And all sorts of references and that sort of thing is fun, to me. And I think, maybe, I do that in *Sorry to Bother You*, as well. In the movie. But, yeah. I wanted to make something that was chock-full of references and also had a larger allegory about the myth of black capitalism. Again, most people will hear it and it’s just the story that happens. You know.

And I also wanted to—I also wanted to make something that got across... something emotional. I think starting out, like, being all about lyrics, you can get really caught into the—you can get really caught into these conventions that are supposed to mean you’re a good lyricist. Which are like similes and metaphors and being clever.

00:23:30 Jesse Host

Similes that are usually puns more than they are similes.

*[Boots agrees emphatically.]*

Like, they don’t really bring a lot of clarity. It’s more just like a cute thing you said.

00:23:36 Boots Guest  
00:23:37 Jesse Host

Yeah, exactly.

Which can be very cute. Shout out to Chino XL.

*[Boots agrees with a laugh.]*

00:23:40 Boots Guest But, like—  
Yeah. And it's all about being clever, which subtracts you from the emotion of art. You know? Like... nobody wants a clever painter or a clever, you know—they want something that—a piece that, like—they don't want a sculpture that just makes you laugh. "Oh! The *[censored]* is in the—in the ear! That's cool!" You know. They want something that is—

00:24:08 Crosstalk Crosstalk **Boots:** That changes their—

00:24:13 Boots Guest **Jesse:** Somebody in art school is writing that down real quick. *[Mumbling.]* "Put *[censored]* in ear."  
*[Laughs.]* Yeah, they—you know. So, this was kind of an exercise at trying to figure out a story that could move me enough to... translate that onto paper and pen and into a song, to translate an emotion in there. And I think this was, like, the beginning of me being able to do that. Which didn't—then, did change my songwriting style, to the chagrin of some of my fans. And, you know—but then to the delight of some people that became fans, after that.

00:24:48 Jesse Host I think it's also a hip-hop record by a man about women, that feels very full in the way that it embraces the problematic relationships between women and exploitative systems. And also, men who participate in those exploitative systems. And in a way that's much fuller than, you know... there are—a lot of hip-hop records by dudes about women are either misogynist or they're, "I love my mom."

*[Boots agrees.]*

00:25:23 Boots Guest Like, yeah, great. Like, we all love our mom.  
00:25:25 Jesse Host This is about—yeah.  
And I've honestly—I've enjoyed hip-hop songs of both of those types, but—

00:25:39 Boots Guest I love your mom, too. Like, I don't even know.  
00:25:30 Jesse Host Oh, thank you. *[Laughs.]* Yeah, my mom's great.  
00:25:34 Boots Guest *[Laughs.]* She—everybody loves—she's a teacher and everyone seems to love her.

00:25:39 Jesse Host Yeah.

*[They chuckle.]*

00:25:55 Boots Guest But, like, that—I feel like, from listening to the song, that was a choice you made. That you—that you, as a dude, wanted to make a song about women that was richer than some of the other songs about women that were out there.  
Yeah. I think that—well, I didn't approach it from that standpoint, but I guess my—my standpoint is that sexism and patriarchy affect women the most, but oppressing women makes men's life worse as well. Like, what affect does living in a world like that have on you? On your personality? On your soul? I'm saying that you living in a world where masculinity is defined by oppressing women—

00:26:32 Jesse Host Violence and dominance and...  
00:26:33 Boots Guest Yeah. Is—is not a full world. And you kill part of yourself. And so, that was the point of it, is that it's not—we shouldn't just be against these things, because we're against the oppression of women. We

should also be against them because we wanna live life to its fullest and be as free as possible.

00:27:00 Jesse Host It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest, Boots Riley, fronts the rap group, The Coup. He also wrote and directed the film *Sorry to Bother You*.

What was it like for you when—as the years went by and The Coup was, in many ways, what you would call a band, but it was also a hip-hop group? Which is to say that initially it was the three of you.

*[Boots confirms several times.]*

It was Pam the Funkstress DJ, E-Roc and you, MCing. And, you know, after a few years, E-Roc left and went and got a job. I remember—I don't know if this is actually true, but I remember that I feel like it—that everybody said, "Oh yeah, he works at FedEx, now."

00:27:39 Boots Guest No, he's—he became a longshoreman. Which—  
00:27:42 Jesse Host Oh! There you go. So, that's a good job!  
00:27:43 Boots Guest —pays—yeah, it's like \$100,000. And it's like, "Dude!"  
00:27:46 Jesse Host Yeah, that's a—I was about to say FedEx is a good job, because I had an aunt that did great working at FedEx, but uh...  
00:27:52 Boots Guest The confusion is—is that he and met while working at UPS.  
00:27:56 Jesse Host Oh, okay. There we go.  
00:27:57 Boots Guest It was me, him, and Spice 1, loading up bellies of planes.  
00:28:02 Jesse Host That's a pretty killer lineup! *[Laughs.]*  
00:28:04 Boots Guest Yeah. And we would hide from the managers in the bellies of the planes and rap.

00:28:10 Jesse Host So, he left the group after a couple of years. And then after many years, she has since passed away, but after many years, Pam the Funkstress—your DJ—essentially left the group to have a job. To run a business. She was a—had a catering business.

00:28:25 Boots Guest Yeah, she was—what it was is she was always—she always was running a business. She was—she bought the place that she was working for. She worked out a deal with them and bought it in, like, '98. So, she was already doing that for a while. But her business paid way more than going out on tour with us. And she tried to go out on tour with us and let a family member run it while we were on tour, and she almost lost the business. So, she was like, "I'm not doing that, again."

00:28:57 Jesse Host So, what was it like—to you—to think, "I'm—" You've always had these big dreams about what The Coup is. More than just a band, I think. You know, you've always seen it as a way to communicate a message and move a movement.

*[Boots agrees.]*

What was it like, to you, to lose these friends in this effort to—reasons that were very reasonable reasons? Like, not reasons that you could object to.

00:29:28 Boots Guest Yeah. No, I mean, with E-Roc, it just totally made sense. It wasn't—it didn't feel like a knock or a blow. And, you know, I still communicate with E-Roc. And... you know. Matter of fact, we did a lot of work with the longshoreman during the Occupy movement. And, you know—he always was a reluctant member, in the first place. 'Cause he basically—he was my friend from UPS and one

day, New Years Eve, going into 1991, I was like, “[Censored] it. Whoever—whatever studio is open tomorrow that will answer the phone on New Year’s Eve, and they’re open tomorrow, I’m taking my money and I’m making this music that I said I was gonna make.”

And got a guy to answer the phone and then I realize I didn’t have—I only had enough to pay for the studio. Didn’t have even bus fair, after that. And so, I called my friend E-Roc up, who had a car.

*[Jesse laughs.]*

And *[laughs]* you know—‘cause I, at the time I was driving this moped and so I was—I had to bring records to the studio. There was no way. You know. And so, he came and on the way there I was like, “Man, you should be in the group too!”

And he was like, “Okay!” And that’s how he got in the group. And throughout the whole time he was just kind of like, you know, like, “Okay. I guess this is what we’re doing.” But—so, it was a lot easier for him to do something else. And then—

00:31:10 Jesse Host  
00:31:11 Boots Guest

But you—but you and Pam had been partners for 20 years. Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. I mean, I think—as far as just talking about the impact of not working with different people... I think that I’m so stuck on getting the next thing done, that it just goes immediately into problem solving mode. I’m not like... I’m not really mourning the past of what happened. I’m more like, “Okay. This is how we’re gonna have to get this next thing done.”

And, you know, just the way that we worked a lot of times was that I’d do an album and Pam would come in, at the end, and lay the scratches down. And so, it more—it definitely was a change in, kind of, the feeling of who we were and who we, like, kind of identified as. Yeah. I think that—and I think there’s something about that in life, too. Like, you—you just keep pushing and you have all this work to do and you don’t really have time to, you know, maintain friendships or *[laughs]* you know—or be with family enough and there’s all of this stuff. And so, I’ve lived this life of doing that. Like, decades go past and you’re just working to try to make this thing happen. And that’s kind of maybe why The Coup has... like, we never got hooked in nostalgia ‘cause it would be easy.

Like, there’s a lot of groups that came out when we did that are just touring based on, “We’re from the ‘90s! You like the ‘90s, now!” You know what I’m saying? And I never was interested in doing that, because—because we never blew up, I knew that maybe blowing up was on the horizon. And, you know, didn’t pay attention to what people said about this or that. And so, my music was always about here and now. And our set were always about here and now. We weren’t, like, “Here’s the songs you know and love!” We were like, “We’ve got this new *[censored]* you’re gonna love!” You know? And it was more like, “Okay. These are the factors we’re dealing with. We’re going on.” It wasn’t really like a sentimental connection to what I thought The Coup was. You know. There was, like—it’s a—

Like, people come up to me with tattoos of The Coup logo. I mean, it's cool and the—but they're often, like, "Where's yours? Obviously you have one?"

*[Jesse laughs.]*

I'm like—you know, I'm not that committed to this group.

*[They laugh.]*

00:34:01	Jesse	Host	I don't know! You know, who knows what's gonna happen!
00:34:03	Boots	Guest	<i>[Laughing.]</i> It's only 25 years!
00:34:04	Jesse	Host	<i>[Laughing.]</i> You don't know!
00:34:05	Boots	Guest	27 years.
00:34:06	Jesse	Host	You know. Yeah, yeah.
			You must have had to think about what the group meant, in a retrospective way, when Pam got sick.

*[Boots agrees several times.]*

00:34:48	Boots	Guest	Because you were, you know—because you were still the public figure, in the group. You were kind of the conduit of information about her illness, when she was really sick. And I imagine that you must have absorbed a lot of... stories about the meaning of her work, to people. And by extension, your work, to people. Yeah. I... um. <i>[Beat.]</i> It's hard for—it's not—how do I—? It's hard for me to feel like, "Wow, I really did that." Or anything like that about the stuff that I've done. Because the goal of the movement that I want to see is so much greater than people liking the music. You know? Like, for me it's like, "Check. Good. Now, there's this other thing." So, emotionally, I'm glad that people connected to the music. And it means a lot to me. But, it's not in a way that you would think would be satisfying. Like...
00:35:34	Jesse	Host	Do you let yourself feel satisfied about anything?
00:35:37	Boots	Guest	Um. No, I don't think I do. I just <i>[laughs]</i> —
00:35:41	Jesse	Host	'Cause you're in middle age. You're allowed to be happy about some things, now.
00:35:43	Boots	Guest	Yeah, yeah. It's hard! It's hard for me to—I don't—I have never taken a vacation. I've been a lot of places and had a lot of fun, but it's always—the only way I can have fun is if there's some reason that I'm there. Some reason that I'm doing it. And I think, you know, that's valid. Like, you want—there's some people who, you know, maybe work a tech job and wish that their job was doing art and engaging with people in different places. And so, my work is not—I'm not lifting boxes or anything like that. But, you know. So, there's something to be said for that.

But, I think being onstage and showing this movie—I sit through a lot of screenings of the movie. And seeing people—and sometimes, you know, I'll get asked, "Oh, are you gonna sit through the screening?"

I'm like, "Oh, hell yeah!" People are—this is my work and I get to see people interacting with it. At those moments... those—that feels like the closest to satisfaction. "Well, this worked." Or even when

00:37:03 Jesse Host it's, like, not working or something like that. It's—it feels like an engagement. And that's the closest thing that I feel to satisfaction. We'll finish up my interview with Boots Riley when we return from a break—he'll tell me that even though he advocates for change in all of his creative work, he doesn't think that art alone can start a revolution. It's *Bullseye*, from [MaximumFun.org](https://www.maximumfun.org) and NPR.

00:37:20 Promo Promo **Music:** Low, chiming music fades in slowly.

**Kelly McEvers:** The coronavirus pandemic is changing everything, really fast. So, we have created a podcast where you can hear conversations and stories from NPR journalists who are covering the pandemic, the public health fight against it, and how the world is coping. I'm your host, Kelly McEvers. Listen and subscribe to *Corona Virus Daily*, from NPR.

00:37:40 Promo Promo *[Music ends.]*  
**Music:** Faint, suspenseful violin music in background.

**Justin McElroy:** We're the hosts of *My Brother, My Brother and Me*, and now—nearly ten years into our podcast—the secret can be revealed. All the clues are in place. And the world's greatest treasure hunt can now begin.

**Griffin McElroy:** Embedded in each episode of *My Brother, My Brother and Me* is a micro-clue that will lead you to 14 precious gemstones, all around this big, beautiful blue world of ours.

**Travis McElroy:** So, start combing through the episodes—eh, let's say—starting at episode 101 on.

**Griffin:** Yeah, the early episodes are pretty problematic, so there's no clues in those episodes.

**Travis:** No. No, not at all.

**Griffin:** The better ones—the good ones? Clues ahoy.

00:38:33 Jesse Host **Justin McElroy:** Listen to every episode repeatedly in sequence. Laugh if you must, but mainly, get all the great clues. *My Brother, My Brother and Me*: it's an advice show, kind of, but a treasure hunt, mainly. Anywhere you find podcasts or treasure maps, *My Brother, My Brother and Me*—the hunt is on!

It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. We're listening to my conversation with the great Boots Riley. He wrote and directed the film *Sorry to Bother You*. It's an absurd, brilliant story about telemarketing, capitalism, monsters, and more. He also fronts the legendary Bay Area rap group, The Coup. Lets get back into our conversation.

You talked about the way that, in your lyrics, you tried to have emotional—emotional connections to people's problems, in the world.

*[Boots agrees.]*

And I think that you're as good as anyone there is at drawing connections between, kind of, real human stories and problematic

systems. And a song that, you know—another one on the very short list of rap songs that make Jesse cry, um—*[chuckles]* like, it's a real—

*[Boots laughs.]*

I've loved hip-hop my whole life, and like, it's a real short list. There's a lot more songs that make me wanna party. Is a song called "Underdogs", that's from that same record in 1998.

*[Music fades in.]*

00:39:47 Music Music Yeah, I mean, let's take a listen to it.  
"Underdogs" from the album *Steal this Album* by The Coup.

*There's certain tricks of the trade  
To try to halt your defeat  
Like taking Tupperware to an "all you can eat"  
Returning used shit for new saying  
You lost your receipt  
And writing four figure checks  
When your account's deplete  
Then all your problems pile up about a mile up  
Thinkin' about a partner you can dial up  
To help you out this foul stuff  
Whole family sleepin' on a futon  
While you're clippin' coupons  
Eatin' salad tryin' to get full off the croutons*

00:40:12 Jesse Host *[Music fades out as Jesse speaks.]*  
What's interesting to me is you have these songs that are so specific and so humane, but very rarely—especially for an MC, but for a songwriter, in general—very rarely are you writing about yourself from a first-person perspective.

00:40:33 Boots Guest Yeah. Um, it's interesting. Because that one, to a certain extent, was. I started that song—I have a—I had a friend who actually appeared on a couple Coup albums. He went by the name Point Blank Range. And he died recently. Like, a couple years ago. But something had happened where he had kind of scammed my father out of a couple hundred dollars. And this was somebody that we had helped a lot. Like, you know, not only with his music and stuff like that and... you know, I started out writing, like, a diss song. Like, about it. And just, while writing that, thinking about his life. This was a guy who had—when he was kid, got burned and covered in burns and lived... you know, it's hard to even talk about it, but anyway. Uh, this was a song that came out of that.

And the reason that it's hard, is 'cause he died recently. And he kind of lived hustling and sometimes betrayed his friends. And this was me writing a song that came from understand—*[his voice breaks]* an understanding of a whole situation that he was in. And that came first from a point of disgust. And ended up with this song. So, definitely is really personal. And is one of the only songs that I do acapella. So.

And I had actually forgot about the origin of it, until like, years and years later.

00:42:54 Jesse Host That you had been feeling this anger towards this friend who had stuck it to your dad, and that that had led you to think about those circumstances that you recognized?

00:43:08 Boots Guest Yeah. *[Beat.]* Definitely. And he was a really good rapper, too. He's on The Coup song, "Kill My Landlord". He's on—what's that other one? "Interrogation."

00:43:24 Jesse Host I'm Jesse Thorn. Here with me now is Boots Riley.

So, in the movie, you have two main characters—one of whom is going through extraordinary financial success, as a salesman, and has to deal with the implications of that for his community, his peer group, the labor movement that he leaves behind as he becomes more and more rich. And also, what he's selling. And an artist who is his girlfriend, who is dealing with her feelings about the value of what she does and dealing with—you know—some—there's some ambivalence in the film about, like, what is the impact and value of art, as well.

00:44:31 Boots Guest Was that something that you just—were those ideas just ones that you had been working in your hands, like, smoothing a river stone? Those are the ideas that I'm struggling with all the time. *[Laughs.]* You know? And, to a certain extent, every—you know—there's Steve Yeun plays Squeeze who's a union organizer. And Jermaine Fowler plays Sal, who's kind of like always making light of things. And yeah. It's—they're all, like, parts of me. And the problems that they're dealing with are ones that I'm always questioning myself about. Is this effective? How do I make it more effective? And, on the Cassius side, what does it all mean? What are—what am I? How do I make use of this time that I'm here? How do I make it important? And, yeah.

00:45:28 Jesse Host So, all of these are things that are running through my mind at all times.

That's a lot of load to bear. I mean, that's something that I personally struggle with, too. And I try and check myself once in a while and say, like... it is okay to, like, leave the world better than you found it. You don't have to *[laughing]* transform the world, personally.

*[Boots agrees several times.]*

You know what I mean? Like, maybe it's okay that, like—you know, I do a really dumb comedy show that's not about anything, right? On that really dumb comedy show that's not about anything, I do have to occasionally remind myself, like, once in a while somebody is really sick. Or their mom is really sick. And they're driving home and they, you know, send me an email and they say, "I just wanted to have something that made me feel nice for 20 minutes." I kind of have to remind myself.

But, like, if you are always looking at the top of the mountain, changing the world—which I know you believe really strongly in changing the world—you know, revolution has always been your explicit goal. Right? A monumental change.



00:46:37	Boots	Guest	Yep. Uh—
00:46:38	Jesse	Host	That's a lot to carry, as a person.
00:46:42	Boots	Guest	Well yeah. And the problem is that no one person is supposed to carry it. And the—that's the reason for organizations, is because you're—no one is gonna change anything on their own. Which is kind of the fallacy about art, is like, "I can make this thing that will change the world!" It's not even effective if you're not connected with people that are doing things that cause a material change in the distribution of wealth, honestly. You know, this idea that's out there of, like, just let your voice be heard and that's enough is also—also leads to this immense pressure on one person. Like, because yes, individually we're not effective at doing anything, really. Like, we really can't even feed ourselves individually. <i>[Laughs.]</i> You know? It takes a lot of people to get food onto our plate. You know.
			So, changing the world, it's—and change—and by that, I mean making a world in which—and in my mind this is what I'm talking about—making a world in which the people democratically control the wealth that we create with our labor. Making a world in that way is not something that's gonna happen from one artist saying the right thing. I think that the key is—and, often, that's how activism is approached as well. Is like, "There's a thing! Let's go to it! There's this other thing! Let's go to it! Let's—" And it's... people not necessarily having the time and organizations not approaching it from the sense of building an organization that can help each other to do these things. And so, yeah.
			Some of those pressures and some of those worries come from the amount of work that it takes for me to make things and my—you know—I don't write very fast. I don't, you know, do anything very fast. So, my—my way of working... if I'm going to actually produce these pieces of art, is one that does not really allow me to do a lot else. Which is why the times when I've gotten involved in stuff, I've had to quit doing music or doing art of any kind. There—you know—so, it ends up being isolating, not only politically, but with family and friends 'cause it takes a lot more work and I wouldn't be doing it if I only—you know—if I only allotted eight hours a day or ten hours a day to doing it. I'm always working. I'm always feeling like, you know—one reason I like movies is 'cause I can—is finally escape and be okay with not <i>[laughs]</i> —not what—the things that I'm not getting done, right now.
00:49:47	Jesse	Host	Not that, uh—not that your movie allows for that much escape.  <i>[They laugh.]</i>
00:49:57	Boots	Guest	I think. Like, you really—you really keep people on target.
00:49:59	Jesse	Host	Yeah. Well, I also—
00:50:00	Boots	Guest	With the tonal evolution of the film. Exactly, yeah. I wanted to make a movie that kept you engaged. Not, like—you know, there are definitely movies where you can—where you know the structure and they're good movies, partially because you know the structure and the beats within what the director's dancing in. And you can see what they do with that. But, this is one where I think the structure hopes to keep you engaged and on your toes. You're not gonna think, "Oh, right about here is

where I can go to the bathroom.” *[Laughs.]* You’re gonna understand from it, like, you might go to the bathroom, but you’re gonna miss a very good part of this. So, go to the bathroom before you see the movie.

*[Jesse bursts into laughter and Boots chuckles softly.]*

00:51:05 Jesse Host

And... and yeah. And so, I wanted to keep people engaged with that, to give that feeling of—that hopefully life brings. And I know I’ve kind of been painting more of a bleaker picture of life, in this interview, but you know—that excitement. Well, it’s a very joyful movie. I mean, it’s about really scary things about the world, but it’s a joyful film.

*[Boots agrees.]*

00:51:37 Boots Guest  
00:51:39 Jesse Host

Boots, I gotta tell you this. You know, as a guy who made art that was really important to me as a teenager, when you found a new lane—you know, nothing’s more important than the art that was important to you as a teenager. And when you found a new lane, I was like, “Uh-oh. Oh no. This guy I admire is gonna do something I really don’t like, and it’s really gonna bum me out!” *[Chuckles.]* Like *Graffiti Bridge*. *[Laughs.]* Absolutely! And I went to your movie and, man, did it deliver. So, I’m—I feel like—I feel, like, proud of you for blossoming in this new medium. And I’m so glad that you took the time to come back and be on this show.

*[Music fades in.]*

00:51:55 Boots Guest  
00:51:58 Music Transition  
00:52:02 Jesse Host

It’s nice to see you again. Thank you, man. Thanks a lot. I’m glad you liked it. Relaxing music plays. Boots Riley. *Sorry to Bother You* is a great film, an instant classic. It’s streaming right now on Hulu. It’s available to rent or buy pretty much anywhere else. I can’t recommend it highly enough. It is a mindblower. It is hilarious and insightful and, at times, kind of terrifying. It’s a great movie.

If you haven’t checked out The Coup before, maybe start with their album from 1998, *Steal this Album*. I might be recommending that only because it’s the one that I started with, when I was 17. But!

*[Music fades out.]*

00:52:50 Music Transition  
00:52:52 Jesse Host

It’s a truly exceptional record, featuring “Me and Jesus the Pimp”—the story song that we talked about in this conversation that I think is maybe the best story song in hip-hop history. Upbeat, bouncy music plays. That’s the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye* is *[chuckling]* currently being produced out of the homes of me and the staff of MaximumFun, in and around Los Angeles, California. This is normally where we would do an update on what’s going on in MacArthur park, but none of us have been to MacArthur park this week. So, an update on what’s going on in my house: my son, Curtis, woke us up at 5:30 in the morning, the other day, to tell us

about a dream he had about his brother, Oscar. He said, “Mommy, I have a sad feeling. I had a dream and Oscar was wearing a helmet that was a sandwich.”

Our 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, aka DJW. Our theme song is by The Go! Team. Thanks to them and their label, Memphis Industries, for letting us use it.

And we have decades of interviews in our archives. If you—if you need a—if you need a friend ‘cause you’re self-isolating, this week, why not go to [MaximumFun.org](https://MaximumFun.org) and scroll through the *Bullseye* page or open up *Bullseye* in your favorite podcast app and take a look for a name that jumps out at you. If you liked this interview with Boots Riley of The Coup, he’s been on before! I do love Boots and love The Coup. We’re also on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Just search for *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn*. You can keep up with the show, there. And know that we, at *Bullseye*, are thinking of you. It’s tough times out there and our hearts are with all of you and we’re grateful that we’re able to connect with you in this unusual way.

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

00:54:54    Promo                      Promo

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

*[Music fades out.]*