

00:00:00	Music	Transition	Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.
00:00:01	Promo	Promo	Speaker: <i>Bullseye with Jesse Thorn</i> is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.
00:00:12	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. A fast, upbeat, peppy song. Music plays as Jesse speaks, then fades out.
00:00:21	Jesse	Host	Bill Withers died about a month ago. Like a lot of us, I was home when I heard. I was processing the news of the world shutting down around us, trying to figure out how I and my family and my company would carry on.

[Music fades out.]

The world was a scary place and it still is. It was a tough time to lose a hero. Besides the great hits and beautiful melodies, Bill Withers had two great, unsung gifts: the plain, devastating clarity of his lyrics—which are breathtaking without ever having a moment of pretense—and his voice, deeply and profoundly soulful but distinctly non-churchy. As plain and powerful as his lyrics. Bill Withers songs are full of warm insight and cutting insight, as well. His anger was righteousness. His kindness was enveloping. So, maybe the world lost Bill Withers when they needed him most. Or maybe the world always needed Bill Withers. What's left behind is his music. It'll be there to comfort us, to inspire us, to soothe us, and to keep us moving. So—excuse me—we're going to do something different on this week's *Bullseye*. We're going to play my two interviews with Bill Withers.

The first one came from 2007. Withers left the music industry in the early 1980s, and he didn't really do press. And in 2007, when I was making this show basically by myself in my apartment, I got a press release for a movie called *Soul Power*. And I responded to it. It was a documentary—is a documentary made from the footage of the concert that accompanied The Rumble in the Jungle. If you've seen *When We Were Kings*, the boxing documentary, it's the same pool of footage that they drew upon, but the music part of the giant festival. And I thought, maybe, I would get an interview with the folks who made the documentary. But they emailed me back and they said, "Hey! One of the artists in the film—" And the concert had Celia Cruz and the Fania All-Stars and Fela Kuti and James Brown—an incredible line-up. He said, "One of the artists in the film is actually making himself available for interviews, if you would like to talk to him. His name is Bill Withers. We're not sure if you're familiar."

And I couldn't believe it! I don't think they knew that Bill Withers had basically done no press in 20 or 25 years. So, I went to a hotel. I think it was the Beverly Hilton or something. And waited in line behind *Pasadena Magazine*, to bring my portable recording rig to Bill Withers and talk to one of the greatest singer-songwriters of the 20th century. It was a pretty incredible experience. It was probably

the most... powerful experience that I've ever had, doing this show. Because Bill Withers was as brilliant [*chuckles*] at thinking and talking as he was at writing beautiful songs. And he also had lived a full life. In fact, he had lived more than one. He had lived a full life before he became a songwriter. He lived a full life as a professional musician. And he lived a third full life with his family, after he retired from the music business.

00:03:38 Jesse Host And, basically, he just didn't take any mess. And, you know, I think [*chuckling*] he thought he had me clocked. I mean, I was a goofy looking, 20-something, white dude wandering into this hotel conference room, or whatever. It was incredible. He was funny and insightful and decent and... he gave me about as good as I could take and was also incredibly warm and kind to me.

At the end of the interview, I asked him to sign a record for me—which I've only done a couple of times in my whole career, asked somebody to—you know—take a picture with me or sign an autograph. But I really, really love Bill Withers! And... he signed it, "To Jesse. Thank you for your time and thank you for listening."

So, let's listen to Bill Withers.

[*Music fades in.*]

00:04:34 Music Music Here's one of his greatest hits, "Use Me".
"Use Me" by Bill Withers.

*My friends feel it's their appointed duty
They keep tryna tell me*

[*Music fades out as Jesse speaks.*]

00:04:48 Jesse Host It's a really—an honor to have you on this show. Thank you for—thank you for doing it.

00:04:52 Bill Withers Guest Well, thank you! No problem.

00:04:56 Jesse Host You grew up in West Virginia, in a sort of coal mining region. And your dad was a coal miner. And I wonder if it was the sort of—the sort of place where you were either a coal miner or you were leaving town, you know?

[*Bill agrees.*]

00:05:14 Bill Guest When you were 19?
Yeah. When you grew up, you made that choice. You know. I made the choice to go in the Navy. The coal mines held no particular [*chuckling*] fascination for me.

00:05:26 Jesse Host [*Laughs.*] Was it—[*stammering*] were there people for whom they held fascination?

00:05:30 Bill Guest Some people—not a lot of people from my generation, or the people that I knew, went in the coal mines. Because you saw what it did to your father, you know. And there was the black lung disease. There was just—just the whole look and feel of it. And if you think you have other choices—you know, if I gave you two choices. "Okay, take this shovel and dig a hole in the ground and go down in it. Or go do something else."

00:06:03 Jesse Host [*Laughs.*] I'd probably take something else.

[Bill agrees with a laugh.]

Seems like at least even money.

[Bill agrees.]

Did you—did you think about different ways?

[They chuckle.]

Did you think about different ways to get out of town or was the Navy just the first thing that came along?

00:06:19	Bill	Guest	Well, some people move to cities, you know. And they—you know, like New York and, you know—if you look, you know—it was dangerous. It's a dangerous place. You know. It's the only place that I've ever been—I went back down in there, later in life, just to see what it was. It's the only place that's both wet and dusty. The two don't go together.
00:06:47	Jesse	Host	<i>[Chuckling.]</i> No, sir.
00:06:49	Bill	Guest	It's wet and dusty and, you know—you're under the ground.
00:06:54	Jesse	Host	You know, at the same time, the Navy isn't exactly the promise of a danger-free life.
00:07:02	Bill	Guest	No, but I got a chance to go to aircraft mechanic school. I had—you know, I was—worked on airplanes. I wasn't flying in them. I don't know what could happen to me. I mean, you know, I could drop a wrench on my foot, or something. Or walk into a propeller. But, you know. <i>[Laughs.]</i> I learned quickly how to avoid that, you know.
00:07:26	Jesse	Host	You know, my dad was in the Navy just after you left. And a friend of his was killed by a rope on the deck of an aircraft carrier.
00:07:36	Bill	Guest	Yeah, yeah, yeah. Those cables can break, and they whip around, and they can cut you in half. Or, if you're not careful, you can become too comfortable and walk into a propeller. Or get sucked up into a jet engine. That's life. You can—you can drink too much and get excited about your new Porsche and go out on the pacific coast highway and kill yourself. So, there's a lot of ways to die. What we try to do is to lessen the probability of that event.
00:08:06	Jesse	Host	<i>[Chuckles.]</i> Yeah, that's fair.
00:08:07	Bill	Guest	<i>[Laughing.]</i> You know what I mean?
00:08:08	Jesse	Host	I read an interview in which you said that music really wasn't part of your life, when you were in the service. Is that—is that true?
00:08:15	Bill	Guest	Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, no. No. It wasn't—you know.
00:08:20	Jesse	Host	But were you—were you thinking about it? Was it—?
00:08:21	Bill	Guest	I mean, where would you do it? What are you gonna do? Are you gonna go play in one of those Navy bands that goes, <i>[singing to the tune of "The Stars and Stripes Forever" by John Philip Sousa]</i> , "Der-der-dododo-dododo."
00:08:30	Crosstalk	Crosstalk	<i>[Jesse laughs.]</i> Bill: It's not very— Jesse: Let the record state that you indicated falling asleep.
00:08:36	Jesse	Host	Bill: It's not very sensual. You know. But you could—you know, there might be room for a guitar or a ukulele or something like that. Was it—was it something that you were—

00:08:43 Bill Guest If you had that talent, you know. But I didn't have that kind of, you know—I couldn't play a guitar or... *[dubiously]* ukulele.
00:08:52 Jesse Host Eh, it's smaller than a guitar. Sorry! I'm sorry! I didn't mean to suggest that you were a ukulele player!
00:08:56 Bill Guest You can really get funky on the ukulele.

[Jesse laughs.]

I'm surprised James Brown didn't have one, in his band.

[They laugh.]

00:09:05 Jesse Host "Ukulele, hit me! One! Two!"
00:09:08 Bill Guest But I did see a guy from Hawaii—Jimmy Buffett had a guy in his band for a while.

[Music fades in.]

Who could—who made it a very interest—he's like a virtuoso. I forget his name. But he is something—you know, so people can turn anything.

00:09:23 Jesse Host I'm Jesse Thorn. You're listening to my 2007 interview with the late Bill Withers. Here's another one of his songs, "I Can't Write Left Handed".

00:09:32 Music Music "I can't Write Left Handed" by Bill Withers.

*I can't write left handed
Would you please write a letter?
Write a letter to my mother?
Tell her to tell
Tell her to tell
Tell her to tell my family lawyer*

[Music plays softly underneath them as they speak.]

00:10:02 Jesse Host What were your best memories of that time? Or what was the best time about that first, you know, eight, nine years of your adult life?
00:10:11 Bill Host In the Navy?

[Jesse affirms.]

Well, there was a certain validation, for me. At that time, if you were black... you know, you were expected to be a steward, or something. You know, the guys that served the officers. You know, like you see in the movies and stuff. So, there was a chance to prove yourself that you could—that you could do technical things. I remember arriving in Pensacola, Florida, when I was 18 years old. And having to overcome the perception that you weren't smart enough to be an aircraft mechanic. I mean... what kind of genius does it take to change some sparkplugs or something?

[Music fades out.]

So, there was the noble pursuit of trying to change perceptions, you see?

[Jesse agrees.]

You gotta remember, you know, that was the '60s. You see what's going on in Iran, now? With the street stuff? Well, when I was young, that was my reality if I went to Birmingham. *[Laughs.]* You know what I mean? You didn't have to go—you didn't, you know. You know, you didn't even need to go very far. That was my time, in life, where you were trying to change perceptions.

00:11:41 Jesse Host When you got out of the Navy, you held a—sort of a variety of regular-guy type jobs. The kind of jobs that people pulled when they get out of the service, for a while. When did it occur to you to become a musician?

00:11:57 Bill Guest Well, when I got out of the Navy, the... my goal was to do something else.

00:12:06 Jesse Host *[Laughs.]* Good goal.

00:12:07 Bill Guest And I knew, from—you know, you don't—when you have a talent like that... you know you have it when you're five years old. It's just getting to it. You know. It's getting around to it.

00:12:24 Jesse Host You were about 30 when you made your first demos, right?

00:12:27 Bill Guest Yeeeah, somewhere around there. You know, I mean, probably older than that. You know. So, it's like—you watch football games?

[Jesse confirms.]

Okay, figure on Sunday maybe there's 20, 40 million guys watching football games. 1,000 of them think they could—or maybe 10,000 of them think that if they got the chance, they could play quarterback. Three of them probably could. So, I was one of those guys that was, you know, living, *[mumbles]*, and I saw these, and I'd, "You know, I think I could do that." It's like becoming a *Playboy* centerfold. I have run into people who have expressed a desire to be in *Playboy*. Who—it's unfortunate, because they just ain't that cute.

[Jesse chuckles.]

You know what I mean? *[Laughs.]* So—so, in the—in the process—in this big funnel, you got all these people. And it's hard to do, you know, to get into a business like this. First of all, you gotta have the talent. And then you gotta figure out the terrain. You know. What's the path to it? I'm from Slab Fork, West Virginia. So, I managed to figure this out and, you know, through some luck and some conniving, or whatever. The question you get asked most often is, "How'd you get started?" You know. If I knew how to write the book on how to get into show business, I wouldn't have time to talk to you. I'd be too busy working on my book, 'cause I could sell a lot of books.

00:14:09 Jesse Host We'll hear more from the late Bill Withers after the break. Stay with us. It's *Bullseye*, from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

00:14:17 Promo Promo **Music:** Chiming, dreamy music.

Speaker: There's more than one science story out there. If you've ever wondered, "Hummingbird tongues—how do they work?" "Was the movie *Twister* scientifically accurate?" Or "What moons are the best moons?" Listen and subscribe to *Short Wave*, NPR's daily science podcast.

00:14:36 Promo Promo **Music:** Upbeat, bouncy music with electronic accents.

Kirk Hamilton: Video games!

Jason Schreier: Video games!

Maddy Myers: Video games! You like ‘em?

Jason: Maybe you wish you had more time for them?

Kirk: Maybe you wanna know the best ones to play?

Jason: Maybe you wanna know what happens to Mario when he dies?

[Someone chuckles.]

Maddy: In that case, you should check out Triple Click! It’s a brand-new podcast about video games.

Jason: A podcast about video games?! But I don’t have time for that!

Kirk: Sure you do. Once a week, kick back as three video game experts give you everything from critical takes on the hottest new releases—

Jason: —to scoops, interviews, and explanations about how video games work—

Maddy: —to fascinating and sometimes weird stories about the games we love.

Kirk: Triple Click is hosted by me, Kirk Hamilton.

Jason: Me, Jason Schreier.

Maddy: And me, Maddy Myers.

Kirk: You can find Triple Click wherever you get your podcasts, and listen at MaximumFun.org.

Maddy: Bye!

[Music finishes.]

00:15:21 Jesse Host

Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I’m Jesse Thorn. This week, we’re looking back on the life of Bill Withers.

[Music fades in.]

00:15:34 Music Music

We’re hearing my first interview with him, from 2007. Let’s hear another song from Bill Withers: “Ain’t No Sunshine”.
“Ain’t No Sunshine” by Bill Withers.

*Wonder this time where she’s gone
Wonder if she’s gone to stay
Ain’t no sunshine she’s gone
And this house just ain’t no home
Anytime she goes away*

00:15:52 Jesse Host *[Music fades out as Jesse speaks.]*
 Was there a point when you felt that you had—I don't wanna use the phrase "made it", but—was there a point when you felt like you had made it through that funnel and that you were achieving this thing that you had, kind of, convinced yourself that you were capable of achieving? Was it when you made your first record? Had your first show?

00:16:13 Bill Guest You know one of the funniest analogies that I've ever heard? This guy was talking about—he had a blind friend. And he became very angry with the blind friend. And he says, "I can't take it anymore! *[Beat.]* I'm gonna kick his... *[grunts in place of cursing].*"

And the guy says, "You can't do that! He's blind!"

He says, "Oh, he'll know 'cause I'm gonna tell him who's kicking his—"

[Jesse laughs.]

So, *[chuckling]* when you—when that happened, you know it. You know. They let you know. It's not like you can have a hit record and you don't know about it, you know. You need some epiphany *[laughing]* or somebody to tell you, "Hey, man, you've broken through."

00:17:03 Jesse Host *[Laughs.]* You know what I mean?! It's like...
 How did it compare to what you had built up, in your mind—how it was gonna be like? When it happened. I mean, your first record was a—was a big hit. And it was a tiny record. Like, it was a record that I read you made it in nine hours of recording time.

00:17:20 Bill Guest You mean the album or the—?

00:17:21 Jesse Host The first—the first album.

[Bill affirms.]

And—but the first album had a couple of huge hit singles on it. And, you know, so it's this tiny thing that really worked out the way that you had hoped that it would work out. And I wonder how did the—how did the actual experience of having a hit record, being a famous musician, compare to your idea of what it would be like?

00:17:48 Bill Guest *[Beat.]* There's a gratitude. Oh man. Finally, something that I thought I could do worked out! Because there was a lot of stuff that you thought you could do that didn't happen. You know. You know, when you didn't make the football team or the girl you thought was flirting with you, you know, really had something in her eye.

[Jesse chuckles.]

Or, you know—coming from where I come from, you know—when you're a kid, you think you can jump across this creek. And you miscalculate and then you gotta go home and change. You know, 'cause you got mud and water all over you. So, you know, there's that thing. Then a lot of things change, socially, you know what I mean? I mean, there's a business reality to it. You find out that

there's some pretty—you know, there's some pretty mean people, in this business.

00:18:46 Jesse Host Have you seen the—have you seen the movie, yet?

[Bill confirms.]

I watched it on Friday. And one of the things that I was really amazed by, in watching you in the movie, is that—you know, the first—the first 25% or third of the movie is you and all these amazing musicians, you know, getting on an airplane and heading to Zaire to do this concert. It's you and The Spinners and Celia Cruz and the Fania All-Stars and, you know, they're, like, playing claves on the airplane and, you know, it's really amazing. And, of course, James Brown, Muhammad Ali, and Don King. And all these people are on their way over there.

00:19:26 Bill Guest No, they were already—Muhammad—they were there. So.

[Bill agrees several times as Jesse talks.]

00:19:28 Jesse Host Well, they're—you're not on the same—not on the same airplane. But everybody's—it's sort of like this process of everybody going over there. And everybody has this—everybody has a really different tone to this—on this trip. You know what I mean? And there's, like—you know, James Brown is—James Brown, by that point, had spent the last 15 years being, you know, one of America's greatest entertainers. And approached the whole thing like, "Now I'm the world's greatest entertainer."

And you were—you're very quiet, in the footage. And you're almost like—look like you're just taking it in. And I wonder what it was—what it was like, for you, to be in this kind of crazy gaggle of brilliant performers going and doing something, you know, 10,000 miles from where you lived—what it felt like to be—

00:20:21 Bill Guest Well, people have different approaches, you see. I think you approach things according to your personality. And James Brown's personality's different from mine. James Brown's—

00:20:33 Jesse Host *[Laughing.]* To say the least.

00:20:35 Bill Guest James Brown's delivery... was dancing and, you know—and it's fascinating. I mean, it's totally energetic. Mine was sitting on a stool with an acoustic guitar, you know. So that, in itself, would dictate the differences in the approach. And the behavior. So, that's just not my personality, you know what I mean?

00:21:03 Jesse Host There's a scene where you're eating, looks like maybe lunch, and you're sitting between Muhammad Ali and Don King. *[Chuckles.]* And I was—like, it was—it was the most amazing thing to see. And all I could think is what it must be like to be you, sitting in between—I'll use a work that we'll have to bleep on the radio, but basically history's two greatest *[censored]* talkers.

[Bill agrees.]

[Laughing.] And just kind of taking it all in. So, I wonder what was it like to be—to be there with these—with these guys who are just the amazing champions of bravado and be, you know, still Bill?

00:21:42 Bill Guest It's entertaining. You know. It's entertaining. Because, you know, people pay a lot of money to see them and you get them for free.

[Jesse laughs.]

You get them in their rawest form. And its just—you know, it's just hanging out. I happened to be sitting there eating and everybody came and joined me at the table. It was fun, you know, I—you know, you're here. You've got all these characters and personalities and stuff. You can't ask for any more than that. You know.

00:22:12 Jesse Host

I'm Jesse Thorn, you're listening to *Bullseye*. We're replaying my conversation with Bill Withers, from 2007. He died on March 30th of this year, at the age of 81.

I mentioned in my introduction that you have basically full-on retired from music, 20-some years ago. Why do you think you were so done with it, when you were done with it?

00:22:36 Bill Guest

I'm not done with it! You know. Let me tell you something. You know, um...

00:22:43 Crosstalk Crosstalk

Jesse: But I would think, you know, if you wanted to do it—

Bill: You know, we all live inside ourselves, right?

00:22:47 Bill Guest

If you've got people asking you, over and over again, "Why are you doing this and why are you doing that?" You know. Most people don't have to go through that. You just go. So, people ask you, "Why are you doing—" or "Where are you going—?" Just tell them something. You know. Tell them, "Yeah, chew on that for a while." But I mean, I've written stuff—I had fun writing stuff. Jimmy Buffett stuff. George Benson has a new record coming out that I wrote the song—you know, there's stuff to do. But maybe I may have—I have another option. I'm a songwriter.

[Beat.] You know, when I had some kids, I didn't wanna be in Philadelphia and my kids are here. And so, there's this cookie-cutter perception that somebody makes up and you're supposed to fit into it. I don't have to do that. I have choices. You know. I can take my own approach.

00:23:45 Jesse Host

Do you enjoy the performance part of it? Like, I mean, if you were—if you were talking about doing a, you know, a show once a month in Los Angeles, or something like that. Is that something that you think you would—you would still get a kick out of?

00:23:58 Bill Guest

Probably, but it's not a practical thing to do. You know. There's stuff—there's a business reality, that—it costs money to put people together. To put people together to play one show. It's no profitable. It's not a good business. Plus, if you have the option, you know—I'm a songwriter. I mean, I don't need any equipment. I can do it out of my head. I can write it on a piece of napkin or tissue paper or toilet paper! You know, for that matter. You know, people used to say to you, *[aggressively]* "Well, you shouldn't worry about it!" You know. "Let me handle this, and you just go do what I tell you."

In whose world? In whose world?! You know, I used to have a little poem in my mind. You know. "The manager's son goes to Yale and the blues man's son goes to jail." See? The one thing that kept me away out of this music for a long—you asked me why I started late. You know, my father was this coal miner, but he was always interested in reading. Never got a chance to go to school, but he read and he—you know, dignity was very important to him. The first thing that I had to resolve, in my life, and the one thing that was

very important to me—and I had to sort this out: can I go into this thing and avoid the minstrel-ness of it? This is a business. And you got some coold... pimps that will mail you out until you die in your grave. You got as many thieves in this stuff as soul. So, there's a life you have to run. And you do the best you can. And hopefully, as a human being, you improve.

[Beat.] I'm 70 years old. I mean, I'm not some kind of mindless troubadour. You know. I have an intellect I have to manage. I have some thoughts I have to manage. I have a life I have to maintain. I wanna know where my stuff is. You know? I wanna know who I am. I don't wanna be some simple-minded blues boy. You can bleep this out. Kiss. My. *[Censored]*. With that *[censored]*. So, I'm doing the best I can to grow and improve my lineage, as a species. So, I got some responsibilities that require that I be available. You know? I never had the benefit of formal education. And I've always wanted to better myself. I can speak the language. I can write it, make it rhyme for you, if you want to. You know what I mean?

And somebody said, "Education is the sum total of what you know." That's everything from tying your shoe to whether you can do quadratic equations or not. So, I'm not—I'm not saying this should be a template for everybody. But that's just the kind of person that makes sense for me to be. Hopefully, the music that I made, you know, is useful to somebody. I mean, I get letters from people that—nice letters that people say, "Hey, man, my grandmother died, and your song helped me." I like that kind of stuff, you know. As a result, it was important to me, as best I could, to try to wind up with a life that had some stability and some dignity in it. You know, it's like people approach you as if to say, "Well, well, my god. You—how come you're not—" I'm 70 years old! I made some choices earlier than that, that I wanted to be a complete person. Not just this entertainer thing, you know? It doesn't fill up my plate. I love it. Who wouldn't like it, you know? It doesn't fill up my plate.

00:28:47	Jesse	Host	It's such an honor to have you share this time with us. Thank you so much for being on the show. It was really—
00:28:51	Bill	Guest	Thank you, man. And I appreciate it and, who knows? Tomorrow, you know, you might see my name... <i>[mumbles]</i> uh...
00:28:57	Jesse	Host	Well, I'll tell you what. If you get—if you get on the bill somewhere, you got my 50 bucks.
00:28:59	Bill	Guest	—on billboards and written on bathroom walls all over the place.
00:29:03	Jesse	Host	I gotta say, my interest in you doing some shows in LA is just 'cause I've worn out the grooves on—
00:29:11	Bill	Guest	No, I'm flattered!

[Jesse laughs.]

I'm flattered! I appreciate that. You know. I'm flattered, I appreciate it. You know. I'll do the best I can.

00:29:19	Jesse	Host	Well, thank you so much, Mr. Withers.
00:29:20	Bill	Guest	Thank you!
00:29:22	Jesse	Host	Bill Withers! Recorded, frankly, somewhat unexpectedly in a hotel ballroom, in Beverley Hills, in 2007. The occasion was the release of the breathtakingly beautiful and amazing film, <i>Soul Power</i> , which features live performances from Withers and many others—

including Celia Cruz and James Brown. James Brown is deep in his moustache, jumpsuit period.

[Music fades in.]

Celia Cruz is in her—well, her Celia Cruz period. There are lots of extravaganzas on the bill, in that film. And Bill Withers is just a man in a work shirt with a guitar. And he steals the show. Here's his performance of his heartbreaking song, "Hope She'll Be Happier". "Hope She'll Be Happier" by Bill Withers.

00:30:08 Music Music

*Maybe the lateness of the hour
Makes me seem bluer than I am
But in my heart there is a shower
I hope she'll be happier with him*

[Music fades out as Jesse speaks.]

00:30:54 Jesse Host

We have another interview with Bill Withers coming up after a quick break. Stay with us. It's *Bullseye*, from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

00:31:02 Promo Promo

Music: Percussive, upbeat music.

Guy Raz: What's it take to start something from nothing? And what does it take to actually build it? I'm Guy Raz. Every week, on *How I Built This*, I speak with founders behind some of the most inspiring companies in the world. NPR's *How I Built This*. Listen Now.

[Music fades out.]

00:31:20 Promo Promo

Music: Bright, cheerful music.

Speaker: Hey, podcast fan! We have a quick favor to ask. We'd like to get a better idea of who you are and what you care about. So, if you have a couple moments to spare, go to MaximumFun.org/adsurvey. There, we've got a short, anonymous survey that won't take any more than ten minutes to fill out. Plus, if you finish it, you'll get a 10% discount on our merch at the MaxFun store! MaxFun shows have always relied on support from our members and always will. The survey will help keep the few ads we do run relevant and interesting for you. Again, that's MaximumFun.org/adsurvey. All one word. And thanks for your help.

[Music fades out.]

00:32:05 Jesse Host

It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. We're remembering the life and work of Bill Withers, this week. Up next is my 2015 interview with him. It came right after he was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

[Music fades in.]

At the time, too, a bunch of singer and songwriters were organizing a tribute concert to Withers, at Carnegie Hall—the same venue where he recorded his classic 1972 live album. Let's hear a little bit of Withers onstage at Carnegie Hall. This is "Let Me in Your Life". "Let Me in Your Life" by Bill Withers.

00:32:36 Music Music

La, lala, lala

*I only want to love you
Please don't push me away
Let me in your life*

*I wasn't even there when he hurt you
So, why should I have to pay?
Let me in your life*

[Music plays softly under the dialogue.]

00:33:42	Jesse	Host	Bill Withers, it is great to get to talk to you again. Welcome.
00:33:45	Bill	Guest	Well, thank you, bud. Yeah.
00:33:47	Jesse	Host	So, um... how does it feel when you listen to yourself sing, live, 40 years ago?
00:33:59	Bill	Guest	About like it does when I look at my third grade <i>[chuckles]</i> class picture. You know. It's something that's... that I used to be or used to do.

[Music fades out.]

00:34:21	Jesse	Host	First of all, I don't look like that anymore. And I probably don't sound like that anymore, you know. I know I don't feel like that anymore. I feel like when I look at a picture of myself in third grade, it is a struggle for me to relate to a picture that old. And it's a little bit different from looking at something from, like—I'm in my mid-thirties. Like, if I looked at a picture of myself when I was 22, I feel like I—that's something I recognize more than me as an eight-year-old. Like, I barely remember me as an eight-year-old.
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[Bill agrees.]

00:34:52	Bill	Guest	Do you have that kind of distance from your career as a performer? I have more distance than you have years, from my career as a performer.
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[They laugh.]

00:34:59	Jesse	Host	Not quite! Close! But not quite.
00:35:01	Bill	Guest	You're 33? Come on.
00:35:02	Jesse	Host	34, yeah.
00:35:03	Bill	Guest	Yeah. Come on. That's more than 34 years ago.
00:35:06	Jesse	Host	You—your last record came out in the mid-'80s.
00:35:09	Crosstalk	Crosstalk	Bill: Right. '85. Which meant I was 47.

00:35:13	Bill	Guest	Jesse: I was born in '81, so I was little. Yeah, yeah. I've never not heard myself. You know. Fortunately, that stuff plays, still.
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[Jesse chuckles.]

00:35:29	Jesse	Host	So, I've never known it any other way. So, you know.
00:35:32	Bill	Guest	When you were a kid, did you sing? Yeah. Anybody who sings... sang all their life. You know? It's not something you start doing. You know. You may start doing it for a living, or you may start doing it for other people or in a different context, but people who sing, sing as little kids. Everybody.
00:35:55	Jesse	Host	Where'd you sing?

00:35:57 Bill Guest Wherever I was. *[Chuckles.]* Or wherever I felt like it, you know. I didn't have that organized, you know—where people have plays and all. I wasn't in any of that stuff. I was a severe stutterer until I was 30. So, my social life was limited by that. Or probably dictated by that, you know. I didn't wanna take the risk of rejection. So, I basically left people alone. They did what they did, and I didn't expect to be included. You know.

I only thought about growing up and getting out of there. My whole purpose was to leave where I was. I would go to the movies and I would see other things to fantasize about. You know? I knew I didn't wanna be a grownup in that environment. There was nothing that suited me, there. I mean, everybody worked in the coal mines and... There were coal miners, schoolteachers, and the occasional doctor or something. You know.

00:37:02 Jesse Host It was literally a company town, where you grew up, right? So, they—it was—it was sort of a closed loop.

00:37:05 Bill Guest Yeah. Part of the time. The other time I grew up in a town of about 15,000. So... you know. It was—it was what it was. In other words, you can aspire to certain things in certain places. Because they don't exist. You know. Now, if I go around, people say, "What advice do you have to young people that wanna be in show business?"

First of all, you gotta get out of here. *[Laughing.]* Nobody's gonna come here and get you. It ain't here. You know. So, it's rare that people leave there and become me. You have to have a broader vision and a bigger dream.

00:37:54 Jesse Host Did you have a broader vision and a bigger dream even when you were a kid or a teenager? Or could you just see that—

[Bill affirms.]

—that the step was to leave town?

00:38:03 Bill Guest Yeah, I knew I was better than they thought I was. And I had become accustomed to not expecting any approval or any encouragement or anything. You know. They were all gaga over the high school football game. Well, none of those guys were gonna play in the NFL, but I knew that if I got a chance, that I could play on the big stage. You know what I mean? You can't be major league and think minor league. You know. And this is one business you don't get into by accident. If you're in this business, believe me, you tried. You auditioned. You bounced back from rejection. You took on the competition. Think about it. This is a worldwide competition. Everybody in the world is competing for the same piece of pie. So, if you're gonna play in this game, you'll find out. But you gotta put yourself on the line. You know.

00:39:09 Jesse Host When you said that they didn't think that you could do it, who's included in that? I mean... kids in the high school, what—

00:39:16 Bill Host Everybody that I was around. I mean, I had no family telling me, you know, that there was anything special about me. I had nobody even suggesting to me that I could. That's why it's fun that I am, because I can look back on them and say, "Boy, you guys..."

[Jesse chuckles.]

“You guys got it all wrong, man!” You know what I mean? And I can be, [*chuckles*] you know—so, it was kind of fun for me. You know. Not to be arrogant about it, but it’s kind of fun—you know, to say, “Yeah, you thought everybody else was cool.” So, yeah. So, anything you try, if you try—you know, if you’re gonna play on—in the big leagues, you gotta have some perseverance. You gotta have something—you gotta bring something to the table. Out of the whole world. All the people that wanna do this. What separates the one that do from the ones that don’t? There’s a little luck. There’s a little happenstance. There’s a little this. But you can’t discount perseverance. You know. You can’t discount that.

00:40:27 Jesse Host

When you stuttered, as a kid, how did it manifest itself? Was it all the time?

00:40:33 Bill Guest

Most of the time, yeah. Yeah. I figured out that my stutter was a fear of the perception of the listener. And fear doesn’t take any days off. So, the way I dealt with it was to try to raise my opinion of myself and, without being a jerk about it, lowering my opinion of other people.

[*Jesse cackles.*]

You know. Or at least bringing it into some kind of reasonable thing. You know.

00:41:08 Jesse Host

But I mean, I can’t imagine that you had that figured out when you were ten.

00:41:12 Bill Guest

No, that’s why I didn’t stop stuttering until I was 30. You know.

00:41:17 Jesse Host

[*Chuckling.*] So, what did you think was going on when you were ten? I mean, did anyone even tell you, like, this is what stuttering is?

00:41:24 Bill Guest

No. Well, people—yeah, man. People are cruel. You know. They can’t wait to tell you. They, you know, they’ll just make fun of you. And then they have all these home remedies. Like, especially in the South, like that. You know. If they hit you in the face with a dishrag or—all kinds of stupid stuff. You know.

00:41:50 Jesse Host

Did you tell people about your dreams? Were there people in your life that knew that you wanted to...?

00:41:58 Bill Guest

No. That’s the dumbest thing you can do, depending—unless you have very supportive people around. I took my first album cover picture on my lunch break in the factory, where I was working. And guys were laughing. “Hey, Hollywood!” And everybody went—well, six months later, they were all asking me for a job. So, it—you know, you can’t base your aspirations on what somebody else thinks. If you are lucky enough to have people that are pushing you in the back, good. I only had tailwinds. You know. Back then. I only had tailwinds. And the older I got, the less likely I was gonna get some support. You know?

00:42:48 Jesse Host

You’re listening to *Bullseye*. I’m Jesse Thorn. We’re replaying my 2015 conversation with the late Bill Withers, who died on March 30th of this year. Let’s play a song of his from the 1972 live album, recorded at Carnegie Hall.

[*Music fades in.*]

00:43:06 Music Music

It’s “Grandma’s Hands”.
“Grandma’s Hands” by Bill Withers.

*Grandma's hands clapped in church on Sunday morning,
Grandma's hands play the tambourine so well,
Oh, grandma's hands used to issue out a warning,
She'd say, "Billy, don't you run so fast,
Might fall on a piece of glass,
Might be snakes there in that grass,"
Grandma's hands*

[Music continues under the dialogue.]

00:43:41 Jesse Host You were in the service for a long time after high school, right?
00:43:44 Bill Guest Yeah, nine years. Yeah.

[Music fades out.]

00:43:47 Jesse Host So, was the thing keeping you in the service that you had made a
commitment or was it that you weren't ready to do the next thing?
00:43:56 Bill Guest I was probably hiding in there. You know. It was an easy thing to do
and... I didn't have that many other options that I could see. You
know. And... not having been fed a whole lot of self esteem from
outside sources, I was—you know, trying to figure it out. Then,
when I got to California, I said, "Okay. I can do California."
00:44:26 Jesse Host What made you say that?
00:44:28 Bill Guest Because it's California.

[Jesse laughs.]

Was I—if I'd gone back to West Virginia, how would I have gotten
into the music business? Where would I have gone? There is no
music business there.
00:44:44 Jesse Host You mentioned that you stopped stuttering around 30. And that's
about the same time you started recording. Um...
00:44:55 Bill Guest *[Thoughtfully.]* Mm, no I was—later than that. I started recording
about 32 or something like that. But it, you know, one had nothing
to do with the other one.
00:45:05 Jesse Host Well, what changed for you in that period of your life that you felt
like you could have the kind of combination of self-worth and not
being afraid of what other people think?
00:45:17 Bill Guest No, I was born feeling that way. I just had to get around to doing it.
You know. Like I say, people don't start singing at a—you're born—
when you come out of the womb, you hear stuff. You know. It's like
people who can run fast. They're born that way. You're born with
that facility. Now, getting around to doing it—you know, there are a
lot of things that come into play: environment, opportunity, uh... you
know. I knew what I was all my life. I knew what I thought I was. A
lot of people think they are. Not everybody is. The people that are in
this business are really the difference between people who thought
they were and couldn't and people who thought they were and
could.
00:46:14 Jesse Host When you were first recording demos—and the first demos that you
recorded, as I understand it, were sessions that you paid for out of
your pocket that you had save for.
00:46:22 Bill Guest Yeah, all of them.
00:46:23 Jesse Host Did you think you were recording songwriting demos or singer
demos?
00:46:30 Bill Guest I was recording something for somebody else to hear. You know. I
wasn't recording... things for somebody else to sing. You know. It
was for me. I wanted somebody to hear me. If I wanted to be in the

music business, I figured I had to go in the music business. And the easiest way is to record yourself and say, “Here. Listen to this.”

00:46:58 Jesse Host Did you say “here listen to this” in person with anyone? Was there anybody who said, “Okay, let’s—”

00:47:04 Crosstalk Crosstalk **Bill:** Always. I never sent anything.

Jesse: “Throw this—let’s throw this on the reel-to-reel.”

00:47:11 Bill Guest **Bill:** Always. I never sent anything to anybody UPS. It’s only practical to present it yourself. What are you gonna do? Have somebody else do it? You know. That’s one more—that’s one unnecessary step in the process.

00:47:23 Jesse Host That’s scary, though.

00:47:24 Bill Guest Plus, how would you interest some—what’s scary?

00:47:28 Jesse Host To show up with what you’ve got and say—it’s *[laughing]* a lot easier to mail it to somebody! Or, at the very least, to walk up, shake hands with them, put it in their hand, and walk away—than it is to stand there and say, “Okay! Let’s press play!”

00:47:43 Bill Guest You know what, it’s like if you’re that afraid, you need to get a job at... you know, McDonald’s or something where—or wherever you can. Because if you have that kind of fear, you know... probably fear keeps more people out of this business than anything else. So, some people that have immense talent are too afraid and some people that have no talent are unafraid. So, if you’re afraid to shoot your shot... you’re out of the game, anyway. You just took yourself out of the game.

00:48:23 Jesse Host Is fear part of what’s kept you out the business for the last 30 years or so?

00:48:28 Bill Guest No. No, no. I haven’t been out of the business.

00:48:33 Jesse Host Well, you’ve been substantially out of the business. You’ve written—you’ve written—you’ve written some songs for people and you’ve done a little bit of recording, here and there, but for the most part.

00:48:42 Bill Guest Yeah, but it’s hard to drive around all day without hearing something that I did.

00:48:48 Jesse Host It’s *Bullseye*. I’m Jesse Thorn. You’re listening to my 2015 conversation with Bill Withers. He died about a month ago.

When you got your first record deal—as I understand it, you hadn’t really done much performing and especially not, you know, headline performing, “Come see Bill Withers.” Did you enjoy it?

[Bill chuckles.]

00:49:15 Bill Guest When you started, did you—did you like it? I don’t think there’s anybody in the world playing music that doesn’t like it. It’s something you start doing because you like it. You know.

[Beat.] I’m gonna be playing at The Troubadour, Saturday night. You know, I hope some people will show up and I’m looking forward to it. That’s it.

00:49:37 Jesse Host The producer of your first record was Booker T. Jones—famously of Booker T. & the M.G.’s and instrumentalist on a thousand great Stax records and so on and so forth. What did you learn from working with him? When you were—I mean, you know, you were like a guy—

00:49:55 Bill Guest Well, I learned—I learned the studio recording process. And, yeah, I learned how to manage musicians in the studio. I learned a lot from Booker. You know. Because it was the first time I'd been in that situation. And he was very nice to me.

00:50:15 Jesse Host Did he feel like he believed in you?
00:50:18 Bill Guest If he didn't, why would he do it?

[They chuckle.]

00:50:23 Crosstalk Crosstalk You know.
Bill: And so, "Oh, I'm gonna—I'm gonna go down—"
Jesse: People take—people take jobs for a lot of reasons, Bill!

00:50:40 Jesse Host **Bill:** "I'm gonna go down here and make this record with this guy, but I don't think it's gonna happen." Come on, man. That's not even a—that's not even a—no. No, it doesn't work like that.
So, what did that mean to you? As a guy who had—you know, the first 30 years of his life feeling like he had to prove himself against people.

00:50:48 Bill Guest I felt the same way. I had to prove myself against people, again. And if I was to do it now, I'd have to prove myself against people. This is a "prove yourself against people" business.

00:51:01 Jesse Host What part of it did you enjoy the most?
00:51:05 Bill Guest The part I started doing—you know, playing the music. You know, it was—it was, you know... I enjoyed a lot of things that I'm not gonna tell you about, because it's not appropriate. But...

00:51:18 Jesse Host Your wife's sitting right there.
00:51:19 Bill Guest Oh, you know, she's... she's got a radio, so if she was in Philadelphia it would be the same situation.

[They laugh.]

00:51:28 Jesse Host You know.
She has what I could charitably describe as an understanding smile on her face, right now.

00:51:33 Bill Guest Yeah, *[chuckling]* she has no choice. What's she gonna do? Come in here? *[Laughs.]* You know.

00:51:40 Jesse Host It seems like, you know, for a lot of people, the reason they become a performer, or an entertainer is that they want to get some reaction out of people. They want to—

00:51:58 Bill Guest That's the only reason anybody does it! It's called show business. It should be called the showing off business. You do it for attention. Otherwise you could go play in your closet. I mean, why go to Carnegie Hall?

00:52:13 Jesse Host But did something change in the part of the equation that is how much you want and enjoy that?

00:52:23 Bill Guest I don't know. You know. I mean, I've never been anybody else. All I know how to do is be me. We do what we have options to do. I had different options. I've never wanted to be some old, grey-haired guy up at two o'clock in the morning, trying to entertain some people. That's because I have the option to do it. If I didn't have that option—hey, man, I'd probably be booked in the—in some place on the road to Lake Tahoe tonight.

00:52:59 Jesse Host What do you think of most fondly, from your career as a—as a, you know, in recording and performing?

00:53:11 Bill Guest You know, probably James Gadson's garage, before anybody knew who anybody was. We were just over there having fun, playing. You know. Because the genesis as a whole thing, is you play music because you like it. And probably the most enjoyable times you'll ever have doing it is when you're doing it purely because you love and there's no other onus placed on it. I once had a friend who invited me over to his house and he had barbequed. And I said, "Man! You should probably open up a barbeque joint!"

00:54:02 Jesse Host He says, "I like cooking. And I don't wanna screw it up." He says, "I already screwed up music by doing that for a living."
00:54:04 Bill Guest Do you still get that kind of pleasure out of music?
I don't know. I haven't done it in a while. You know. Because I can never go back to that.

00:54:15 Jesse Host I mean, James Gadson's been playing with DeAngelo. *[Laughs.]*
00:54:20 Bill Guest Yeah. Yeah. Buzz Aldrin, you know, went to Tennessee last week. What's that got to do with me? *[Chuckles.]* You know what I mean?
I'm just saying, you have the option.

00:54:30 Jesse Host *[Laughing.]* Somebody else—somebody—James Gadson is a
00:54:31 Bill Guest wonderful drummer. You know.
Good as it gets.

00:54:38 Jesse Host You can be a great drummer longer than you can be a great singer.
00:54:39 Bill Guest You can lift weights longer than you can run track. Some things are—have a certain life to them, you know?

00:54:55 Jesse Host Um... you're in your mid-70s and... you have a certain amount of life left in you.

[Bill hums in agreement.]

00:55:17 Bill Guest Who knows what it is, right? Does that make you think about what you wanna do with the energy that you have?
[Beat.] I don't wanna think about that stuff, man. You know. When you're at the age of mortality, it's not convenient to think about that stuff. You know, if I start thinking about that stuff, I'd be planning funerals and stuff. I do have a choice. You know. I can direct my thoughts in whatever direction I like, you know. But why would—why would I wanna ruminate on that? You know? You know, I want—I want it all to be a total surprise. I wanna take a shower, come out, sit down naked in the chair, and pass away. That way, I will be clean when they come and get me and dressed for the occasion.

00:56:17 Jesse Host I don't wanna think about that stuff, man. Get off of the morbid stuff!
You know what I mean? *[Laughs.]*
00:56:19 Bill Guest We've already established I'm a broken man.
00:56:22 Jesse Host *[Amused.]* Yeah. Yeah, yeah. Yeah.
Well, thank you very much. It's really an honor to get to have you on the show.

[Bill thanks him.]

00:56:26 Bill Guest I mean that for real.
00:56:30 Jesse Host *[Laughing.]* Thank you. No—no problem.
Bill Withers, from 2015. He died March 30th, at the age of 81. Bill Withers was a man who lived his own life. He was born with a stutter that he was determined to overcome. He was raised in a Jim

Crow coal town and he was determined to get out. He was a career Navy man, a union member, determined to have a life in music. He made his debut album at 30. Every one of those goals he had, he met. And when the music business got too poisonous to bear, he walked away. Bill Withers was far from a perfect man. He was deeply troubled. But he fought with all he had to make a path for himself in life. And he succeeded.

It was the greatest honor of my career to talk with him twice.

[Music fades in.]

00:57:35 Music Music

So. Thank you for your time, Mr. Withers. *[His voice goes tight.]* And thank you for giving me the chance to listen. Here's one last Bill Withers' song: "Lovely Day".
"Lovely Day" by Bill Withers.

*When I wake up in the morning, love
And the sunlight hurts my eyes
And something without warning, love
Bears heavy on my mind*

*Then I look at you
And the world's alright with me
Just one look at you
And I know it's gonna be
A lovely day*

(Lovely day, lovely day, lovely day, lovely day)

00:58:19 Jesse Host

[Music continues underneath Jesse's speaking.]
That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye* is currently being produced out of the homes of me and the staff of MaximumFun, all around Los Angeles, California—where we *[chuckling]* hear from our colleague Christian Dueñas that an ice cream truck was driving around, blasting Italian tunes and serving pizza.

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 and Jordan Kauwling. Our interstitial music is by Dan Wally, also known as DJW. Our theme music is by The Go! Team. Our thanks to them and their label, Memphis Industries, for letting us use it. Now is a great time to buy some of Dan or The Go! Team's music. A lot of music performers are hard up 'cause they can't tour right now. So, you can find DJW's *The Best of Bullseye Mix* pay-what-you-will on Bandcamp. And you can find The Go! Team's great albums in any record store. But, hey, Bandcamp's a great place to start.

Bullseye is 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.

00:59:36 Promo Promo

Speaker: *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.

00:59:44 Music

Music

"Lovely Day" by Bill Withers continues.

*And then when someone else, instead of me,
Always seems to know the way*

Then I look at you

[Music fades out.]