00:00:00  Music  Transition  Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.

00:00:01  Promo  Promo  Speaker: Bullseye with Jesse Thorn is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.

00:00:12  Music  Transition  “Huddle Formation” from the album Thunder, Lightning, Strike by The Go! Team. A fast, upbeat, peppy song. Music plays as Jesse speaks, then fades out.

00:00:19  Jesse Thorn  Host  It’s Bullseye. I’m Jesse Thorn. The Isley Brothers’ first hit was “Shout”. Rock and roll was new, soul was even newer, and Ernie Isley, Cincinnati’s own, was seven years old.

00:00:34  Music  Music  “Twist and Shout” by the Isley Brothers.

00:00:41  Jesse  Host  In the ‘60s, they had “Twist and Shout” and a run with Motown. For a while, Jimi Hendrix was their lead guitarist and lived in their Mom’s spare room. Then, in 1969, they reintroduced themselves to the world. They weren’t a singing group anymore, they were a band—with little brother, Ernie, on bass. The song was “It’s Your Thing”.

00:01:03  Music  Music  “It’s Your Thing” by the Isley Brothers.

00:01:18  Jesse  Host  Ernie Isley, brother of Marvin Isley, and brother-in-law Chris Jasper, reinvigorated the band, starting in the early 1970s. Ernie moved from bass to guitar and his sound was key to the family’s revival. They were the rare R&B group which featured raw, extended guitar solos. The Isley Brothers had a nearly unparalleled run of hits, starting with “It’s Your Thing” and continuing into the mid-1980s. In fact, they’re the only group in popular music whocharted in every decade since the ’50s. And their influence extends far beyond their own original recordings. They’ve also been the basis of hip-hop hits, like Bone Thugs-N-Harmony’s “Crossroads”, Ice Cube’s “It Was a Good Day”, and Kendrick Lamar’s “i”.

00:02:02  Music  Music  “i” by Kendrick Lamar.

… making me promises? So, I promise this
I love myself
And when you're looking at me
Tell me what do you see?
I love myself

[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue.]

When we talked, in 2015, the Isley Brothers had just released a new box set that collected all of their records, from the end of the '60s through the beginning of the '80s: Ernie Isley's heyday in the band. Let's get into my conversation with perhaps soul and funk's greatest guitarist: Ernie Isley.

[Volume increases.]

You better be down (down, down, down)
I love myself
[Inaudible]

[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.]

Ernie Isley, welcome to Bullseye. It's great to have you on the show.

Hey, man. Glad to be here!

So, do you remember when "Shout" hit? Like, what it was like for you and your family?

Yeah. There was a lot of excitement and nothing sounded like that song, on the radio. Nothing sounds like it now. And it—from the beginning, that song was a—has been a crowd pleaser. When my brothers would do it, the way they would do it—live—it was a showstopper. It was the song—it was their first national breakthrough hit, but it was also the song that made them a headliner, because nobody—and I mean nobody—wanted to follow them or could follow them. They said, "Oh no, yeah, put the Isley's on in front of us." But when they would do "Shout"? It'd be like—maybe like 45 minutes before the act would come on, whoever that was.

[Jesse laughs.]

Because it was pandemonium. And so, it was like, you know—there was a lot of folks that would be like, "Well." I knew—I heard that Otis Redding said, "I'm not gonna be trying to follow them three guys."

[They laugh.]

'Cause they're—you know, they're not taking no prisoners. So, you know. They got they song. They got that song and they got "Twist and Shout", too at that time, though. "I'm not gonna try to follow them guys."

Did you always intend to join the family business?

No. I was growing up. I was trying to play little league baseball, center field. I was riding my bike, going to school. You know. There's all kind of things to be introduced to as a—as a kid that are new and exciting. And music was just one of them. I started playing drums, though, at the age of 12. And I did my first live gig with my older brothers when I was 14, in Philadelphia. Martha and the
Vandellas were in the show, they didn’t have a drummer. So, I played with them, too. You know, “Dancing in the Street”, “Heatwave”, and all that stuff. And in between the two acts, my oldest brother Kelly handed me a $50 bill and told me to go get a hotdog.

[Jesse chuckles.]

They’re like, “My god!” ‘Cause I’m 14 years old. $50 bill. Still got my stage stuff on. Going through the backstage doors and when the doors swing open, all of these girls my same age start screaming at me like I’m Justin Bieber. [Mimicking the screams airily.] “Aaah! There’s him! He was just up there! Ooh, you play so well! You’re so cute! Da-da-da! [Babbles excitedly]. Oh, do you go to school down here. What’s your phone number?” Like, man, I need to move to Philly.

[Jesse cackles.]

‘Cause [laughs] I didn’t get that kind of action at my school. And you know, the environment of the show and all that’s like, “Man, this is a real rush.” You know?

00:05:24 Jesse Host

It seems to me like there were a few moments when the band really asserted its identity, and the first was “It’s Your Thing”. Which was the big hit single that came out of leaving Motown Records. So, your older brothers had been—had been sign to Motown for a few years and had had—I mean, they had had a big hit in “This Old Heart of Mine”, among other records. But when your vocal group signed to Motown, you’re never gonna be the Temptations the Four Tops. And it seemed like “It’s Your Thing”—on which you played, it was the first big hit that you played on—was a song that was like—that was explicitly about, you know, we’re not part of this machine anymore. We’re going to—we’re gonna do our own thing.

00:06:11 Ernie Guest

Yeah, that was the way some people interpreted it, yes. And no one that was ever signed to Motown and had success at Motown—if they should leave, that was the kiss of death to their career. Proverbially speaking. The first group to defy that was Isley Brothers. ‘Cause they left and started their own label, in T-Neck Records, and the first record on it was—in the spring of 1969, was “It’s Your Thing”.

00:06:45 Jesse Host

I wanna play one of my favorite Isley Brothers records. It’s from one of my favorite Isley Brothers LPs, which is Givin’ It Back from 1971. And you know, we were talking about the ways that you and your brothers kind of asserted your identities and this feels like another big turning point, as a listener. This feels like another big turning point for the band. And I think it’s kind of unusual for that to come in the form of a covers record. But I think if you take a listen to this song, as a listener, you’ll understand. This is a medley of the Neil Young song, “Ohio”, and Jimi Hendrix’s “Machine Gun”.

[Ernie affirms.]

00:07:25 Music Music

“Ohio – Machine Gun” from the album Givin’ It Back by the Isley Brothers.

Should have been done long ago
What if you knew her
And found her dead on the ground
How could you run when you know?
When you know, how could you run?
When you know, how could you run?
Yah!

[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue.]

What did your brothers think about—I mean, like, of all the changes that were happening in R&B—as R&B and soul were becoming—were getting heavier and becoming funk, like, mostly it was not heading towards guitar solos, you know what I mean?

[Ernie affirms.]

So, what did your older brothers think about you coming in, at however old you were—18 years old or something—and saying, like, “Oh, you know what this song needs? Just like a really ripping solo.”  [Chuckles.]

Well, you know, the songs we were doing—if you’re gonna do “Ohio – Machine Gun”, it’s a—you know, which is “Ohio”, Neil Young song, Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young. And you know, “Machine Gun” is Jimi Hendrix. If you’re gonna do that, you know, it’s gotta have guitar on it. And the—both songs are very passionate, in terms of their feeling. And it was only logical, from our point of view, that since we don’t think of ourselves as being categorized—it was only logical that we were gonna go where we felt led. By the time we got to “That Lady”, it’s like, “You guys are a brand-new group. You know, got this brand-new sound.”

I’ll finish my conversation with Ernie Isley of the Isley Brothers after a break. We’ll talk about his relationship with his friend, sometime band-mate and sometime housemate, Jimi Hendrix. It’s Bullseye, from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

Thumpy, relaxed music.

Thanks for listening to Bullseye! What’s the meaning of work and when does being an amateur trump experience? The TED Radio Hour is a journey through fascinating ideas, astonishing inventions, fresh approaches to old problems, and new ways to think and create. Find the TED Radio Hour podcast at NPR.org/podcasts and on the NPR One app.

Chiming, bright music punctuated by cheers.

Jesse Thorn, here. I’m taking Bullseye on the road, in November. It’s our world tour of several American cities. Get your tickets now, while you can. They’re going fast. Come see me and William H Macy and Barney Frank and Tavi Gevinson. John Hodgman. Uh, the director of The Mütter Museum was gonna do medical experiments on me, apparently. Uh, Ray Suarez, Dan Deacon, so many more. Music, comedy, and interviews at every tour stop. Go to BullseyeTour.com to get your tickets. You will not wanna miss this, if you’re in Philadelphia, Boston, New York City, Washington DC, or our own great city of Los Angeles, California. BullseyeTour.com to get tickets.

[Music fades out.]
You’re listening to Bullseye. I’m Jesse Thorn. I’m talking to Ernie Isley, the guitarist for the Isley Brothers who made hits like “Twist and Shout” and “Who’s That Lady”. He started gigging with the band when he was just 14 years old. The Isley Brothers have a new box set of their work: The Isley Brothers – The RCA Victor and T-Nec Album Masters.

You and your brothers, Ernie Isley, were among the few groups that got to play for real on Soul Train. Most people were—most people were—most people were singing or lip syncing to tracks. And we have a little clip of you guys playing “That Lady” a year after it came out, on Soul Train in 1974.

“Who’s that lady?
Beautiful lady, who’s that lady?
Lovely lady, who’s that lady?
Real, real fine lady, who’s that lady?
I would love to take her home
But her heart is made of stone
I gotta keep on keepin’ on
If I don’t, she’ll do me wrong
Oh, she’ll do me wrong
Oh!

[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.]

It’s a pretty amazing performance, Ernie. I feel like when you’re listening to it, you can almost hear the engineer at Soul Train being like, “Oh geez, the guitar is soloing?!” Like, trying to look for the fader for the guitar. [Chuckles.]

Mm-hm. Yeah. Yeah, but—that song turned a lot of heads and it certainly made us different from any other group that was out there—vocal group. Particularly if that’s how it started, I mean, we were still morphing into wherever we were going. And that song was certainly a part of that growth.

Well, let’s hear a little bit of the Isley Brothers and “Fight the Power”, from 1975.

“Fight the Power, Part 1” by the Isley Brothers.

[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.]

When I listen to that song or watch you guys play—watch you guys play on Soul Train, what impresses me is the way that you synthesize these different aesthetics. You know. You’re bringing all these sounds together. Like, “That Lady” is a really sweet ballad that is set off by you giving a really intense guitar solo. You know,
“Fight the Power” is a really heavy—really heavy funk record that is set off by—you know, the kind of vocal back and forth that, you know, your brothers could have done in 1962. In the chorus. Was—you know, had—to what extent was that a—to what extent was it just the group of people that you were?

I think we were just going with it. In terms of trying to describe—I mean, “Fight the Power”… was and is just something that everybody at some point has to do. You wind up dealing with something that is resisting your personal wishes or your will. And you’re going to have to fight that thing. You’re not gonna lay down to it. It represents a call to personal freedom, personal expression. It doesn’t mean that the other person has to like it. I mean, who cares? I’ll go in my own style, at my own pace, as my actual self, without apology.

I’ll finish my conversation with Ernie Isley of the Isley Brothers after a break. We’ll talk about his relationship with his friend, sometime band-mate, and sometime housemate Jimi Hendrix. It’s Bullseye, from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

Radio DJ: Welcome back to Fireside Chat on KMAX. With me in-studio to take your calls is the dopest duo on the West Coast, Oliver Wang and Morgan Rhodes.

[Click.]

Go ahead, caller.

Caller: Hey. Uh, I’m looking for a music podcast that’s insightful and thoughtful, but like, also helps me discover artists and albums that I’ve never heard of.

Morgan Rhodes: Yeah, man. Sounds like you need to listen to Heat Rocks. Every week, myself—and I’m Morgan Rhodes—and my co-host here, Oliver Wang, talk to influential guests about a canonical album that has changed their lives.

Oliver Wang: Guests like Moby, Open Mike Eagle, talk about albums by Prince, Joni Mitchell, and so much more.

Caller: Yooo! What’s that show called again?


Oliver: Every Thursday on Maximum Fun.

[Music suddenly gives way to static and a dial tone.]

Music: Relaxed guitar music.

Lisa Hagen: I’m Lisa Hagen.

Chris Haxel: And I’m Chris Haxel. We’re the hosts of No Compromise, NPR’s new podcast exploring one family’s mission to reconstruct America using two powerful tools: guns and Facebook.
Welcome back to Bullseye. I’m Jesse Thorn. We’re listening to my conversation with Ernie Isley, from 2015. He’s the guitarist for the Isley Brothers: a group with literally decades and decades of hits, from “Shout” to “It’s Your Thing”, “Twist and Shout”, many, many more. Let’s hear the rest of our interview.

Why don’t we listen to an Isley Brothers song from before my guest, Ernie Isley, joined the band when he was just, like, 10 or a 12-year-old, with Jimi Hendrix and “Testify”.

“Testify” by the Isley Brothers.

If it’s in your soul
If it’s in your soul
Oh, stand up and testify!
Come on!

I think it is a pretty remarkable thing to be able to say, “Oh yeah, when I was 11 years old, Jimi Hendrix lived at my house.”

[Chuckles.]

Mm-hm! [Giggles.] Yeah. Yeah, that was cool. You know, I’m sitting in study hall when I was like, you know, 16. I was like—they’re talking about all your experiences like, “Yes, I am.” You know.

[They chuckle.]

Without his record, I am. You know, I already knew who he was. And, you know, I already knew that he played very well—obviously. I’d never heard anybody play like that, play the guitar like that. And when Ed Sullivan said for the very first time, “Ladies and gentlemen: THE BEATLES!” You know, I’m on one side of the cameras and my younger brother Marvin’s on the opposite side, and in the middle was Jimi Hendrix himself. And—but there was no clap of thunder or nothing like that. And a few days went by and there was a meeting with everybody in the band.

My elder brother, Kelly, took the floor and one of the things he said was, “You know, these guys... this whole Beatle thing, they have changed everything. This is no hype. This is legit. And, you know, I don’t know about what’s gonna happen with Connie Francis or Paul Anka or Bobby Rydell or Fabian. I think we’re gonna be alright, ‘cause I understand they do ‘Shout’ and ‘Twist and Shout’. Now, they have two guitar players. But we got Jimi.” And when he said that I looked over at Jimi and he was grinning at that remark, ear to ear, like the Cheshire Cat. [Chuckles.] Because it was true!

You know, and you know, you never know who you’re—who you’re—you know, who you’re rubbing elbows with. They did get him his very first Fender guitar and his very first professional recording session was with the Isley Brothers.
It must have been remarkable for you, as a teenager, when he became one of the most important and acclaimed rock players in the world. It was sort of like human proof positive—this guy that had come out of your house and become a rock and roll god. And not just—not an—you know, had broken beyond the boundaries of R&B, even.

Yes. Yes. He came by the house with Kelly—like a little before Monterey Pop—he came in the house and Kelly said, “Marvin, Ernie? Jimi is killing them in England!”

And we’re like, “England?! What’s he doing over there?!” [laughs.]

And Marv and I thought, “Is that Jimi?” ‘Cause he was dressed different. You know, he had on velvet pants with bellbottoms—he wasn’t wearing patent leather shoes. He had boots. He had a ruffle shirt. He had a hat. He had a vest. He had rings on ever finger. He walked down the hallway or something like, he’d sound like a cowboy. Like Shane or something. [laughs.]

And, you know, you look at him and say, “Yeah, that’s still him. He’s just dressed different.” He’d pick up a guitar and start playing, it’s like, “Yeah, that’s definitely him. That’s—[laughs] that’s him.”

So, you know, it was—if he’d be playing, you know, he’d… he could play and be playing it’s like we would laugh. Not because it was funny, because it was good! You know, he was that good. And you’d be like—like, as a kid, you know, you see somebody do something and they do it so well, you’d be like, “Man—” It makes you laugh! Because, “Man, I wish I could do that! Isn’t that great?!” But he was the only one playing like that. And the fact that he went on to do what he did. It’s like, Lord have mercy. We had a show in 1969 at Yankee Stadium. “It’s Your Thing” was out. And my brother Kelly called him and said, “Jimi, we want you to do—”

He said, “Aw man, really? Aw, I’d love to but let me speak to my people and get back to you.” And a few days went by and he called back and he said, “Kelly, you know, I’d love to do it, but I got this commitment in August to something called the, uh… Woodstock… Arts… and Music Festival. Woodstock Arts and Music Festival, in upstate New York on some kind of farm. And the promoters are concerned that if I play a Yankee Stadium concert, that it might hurt ticket sales up there. So, they [laughing] don’t want me to do it.” Of course, obviously he didn’t have a crystal ball either. But [laughing] you know, he—it’s… it’s a really, like, spiritually an embrace to have these kind of shared experiences.

You were just starting your own career when Jimi Hendrix died. How did it—how did it hit you, when it happened?

Oh, in 1970? I was 18. I was on the college campus, at CW Post College—part of Long Island University, in New York. And I was coming down from the music building and somebody said—I heard somebody say something like, “Did you hear Jimi Hendrix just died”?

I’m like, “Get out of here! That’s a publicity stunt. That’s not—I didn’t know. No.” And I was thinking about the whole thing that year that had been going with, “Paul was dead” if you played the record
backwards and you hear that Paul was dead. It’s like, “You know, that’s the showbusiness, it’s the record company trying to sell some records. Whatever. But it’s not true.” And I got to my room and turned on the radio and I heard that. It was kind of—you know, just a shock, because it was a shock. It was like, “How does something like that—” You know, some things happen. They happen real quick. In a way you don’t have a chance to say, “Wait a minute,” or “Stop,” or “Hold it,“ or [chuckling] “Bye.” You know, it just happened real quick. So, that was kind of weird that that happened and—you know, all of us—the brothers, just lifted our heads like— weird, that that—that that would happen.

And not too after that, too, Janis Joplin passed away. She made it just weirder. Uh—

Did it change—did it change the way that you thought about working in music?

Mm. You know, what it changes—it changes—this is a life, first and foremost. It’s life. And I figured Jimi Hendrix as a person, because that’s how I knew him. That’s how I was introduced to him. There’s a lot of other people that can relate to the icon, to the statue, you know, to all of that… huff and puff stuff that comes along with being in the music business. But, when I think of him I don’t—I don’t think of that at all. I’m thinking about somebody watching Saturday morning cartoons and Super Chicken and Bugs Bunny, playing the guitar like it’s a toy. Playing it all the time. I didn’t know why he played so much. He didn’t need to practice. He was that good.

I read an interview that you, Ernie, and your— and your brother, Marvin, and Chris Jasper did in the mid-70s.

[Ernie confirms.]

And you could almost—there was this part, and I don’t remember which one of the three of you was saying it—but I think it might have been you, Ernie. Where you were saying, you know, “That ‘Twist and Shout’ stuff, that’s not us. We’re not going around shouting ‘woo’.”

[Ernie laughs.]

And I thought it must have been—it must have been interesting to be in a situation where you had these older brothers who were such brilliant and talented musicians, such brilliant and gifted singers and songwriters, but that you and your cohort were, as well. You know. And you were—you were bound together by a lifetime of being a family, but you were also—you know, you were also sort of two groups, you know what I mean? You were this trio that you had played with in high school and these older—these older brothers who you saw when they were home from the road, you know. And I wonder what that was like for you, to be—to be these kind of—these two teams merged into one.

Oh, you had the seasoning, in terms of experience. Personal experience in the business. And at the same time, you had the spirit of, “We’re not gonna be confined by what we already performed.” When you have a—when you’re blessed with the longevity and all of the different musical changes that rock and roll has gone through, it’s nearly impossible, in terms of a show, to fully express…
the entire resume. It's a very thick—Isley Brothers are a very thick musical file mignon. You know? And trying to have that bad boy well done with no pink showing. And if you like steak, that's like—that's what our music is. It's gonna—it's gonna have some flavor.

Well, Ernie Isley, I really appreciate you coming out and being on Bullseye. It was really an honor to get to talk to you.

It's always been—it's great. Sorry, this is kind of like therapy. It's wonderful.

Ernie Isley. Let's go out on one more Isley Brothers song.

[Music fades in.]

"Harvest for the World" from the album of the same name.

"Harvest for the World" from the album *Harvest for the World* by the Isley Brothers.

All babies together, everyone a seed
Half of us are satisfied, half of us in need
Love's bountiful in us, tarnished by our greed
When will there be a harvest for the world?

[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue.]

That's the end of another episode of Bullseye. Bullseye is produced from the homes of me and the staff of Maximum Fun, in and around greater Los Angeles, California—where my daughter, Grace, and I just completed our greatest project. Our magnum opus. Which is, from our friend, Mark Frauenfelder—Boing Boing’s book, *Maker Dad*. It's like a little gimble thingy that you attach to a kite string and then you attach a tiny USB camera to that and then you fly the kite and you shoot stable video from a kite. Did this all with a hand drill and some superglue.

This week's guests, if you didn’t notice, are the pride of Cincinnati, Ohio. We just got picked up by WVXU, in Cincinnati. So, we just wanna salute. Hey, what's up Cincinnati! We see you! I see you, Travis McElroy. I see you, Joey Votto. I see you, other people in Cincinnati. Thanks for having us. Now, we’re gonna try and—we’ll get out there, when travel becomes a thing. I wanna—I wanna come out to the ‘Nati. We'll see you soon.

Our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our producer is Kevin Ferguson. Jesus Ambrosio and Jordan Kauwling are our associate producers. We get help from Casey O'Brien, who—judging by his social media presence—is currently at a lake house somewhere in Minnesota, going insane.

Our interstitial music is by Dan Wally, also known as DJW. Our theme song is by The Go! Team. Thanks to them and their label, Memphis Industries, for letting us use it. You can also keep up with the show on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Just search for *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn*.

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

[Volume increases.]
Dress me up for battle, when all I want is peace

[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue.]

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

[Volume increases.]

… come home with the least
Nation after nation…

[Music fades out.]