

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.
00:00:13	Music	Transition	<i>[Music fades out.]</i> “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.
00:00:17	Jesse Thorn	Host	It’s <i>Bullseye</i> . I’m Jesse Thorn. My first guest this week is Kamasi Washington. He and I talked in 2018. Kamasi plays the saxophone and also does production work. He’s collaborated with Thundercat, St. Vincent, Flying Lotus, Robert Glasper. That’s just a few. On Kendrick Lamar’s now classic album, <i>To Pimp a Butterfly</i> , you can hear his saxophone and arranging work as well.
00:00:42	Music	Music	“Mortal Man” from the album <i>To Pimp a Butterfly</i> by Kendrick Lamar. <i>Do you believe in me? Are you deceiving me? Could I let you down easily? Is your heart where it needs to be? Is your smile on permanent?</i>
00:00:48	Jesse	Host	<i>[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.]</i> But to define Kamasi Washington by the people he’s collaborated with is to do him a disservice. He’s a dynamic, thrilling composer and band leader. Between 2005 and now, he’s recorded about half a dozen solo records, and they are brilliant.
00:01:03	Music	Music	“Change of the Guard” <i>The Epic</i> by Kamasi Washington.
00:01:11	Jesse	Host	<i>[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue.]</i> If you fell in love with the work of Alice Coltrane or Pharoah Sanders, you’ll hear something familiar in Kamasi’s music. Like them, Kamasi writes songs from a transcendent, almost spiritual place. It’s strange and lush, hypnotizing melodies. The songs run long. But just like the free jazz greats before him, you end up losing yourself.
00:01:34	Music	Music	<i>[Volume increases.]</i>
00:01:40	Jesse	Host	<i>[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.]</i> But Washington isn’t a product of the late ‘60s. He grew up in the ‘80s. He was raised here, in Los Angeles, where we make <i>Bullseye</i> . And he grew up listening to jazz music, but also NWA and Marvin Gaye and Snoop Dogg. So, the music he makes is eclectic, but effortlessly so. It’s why his albums have ended up on so many critics’ top ten lists and it’s also why those same critics have written thousands of words asking the same question: can Kamasi Washington make jazz a young person’s game again? It’s a weird position to be in, to be called the savior of a kind of music that you live and breathe. He doesn’t think about it much.

Instead, he keeps putting out new records, working on new collaborations. He's getting back to playing live music, too. Just last month, he did a jaw dropping performance at the Hollywood Bowl with Earl Sweatshirt. He's got more on the horizon.

[Music fades in.]

His most recent record is called *Heaven and Earth*. Let's listen to a track from it. This is "Street Fighter Mas".

00:02:41 Music Music

"Street Fighter Mas" from the album *Heaven and Earth* by Kamasi Washington.

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

00:03:02 Jesse Host

Kamasi Washington, welcome to *Bullseye*. I'm so happy to have you on the show.

00:03:05 Kamasi Washington Guest

Oh, thanks for having me.

00:03:06 Jesse Host

Is that really a song that you wrote for yourself to be your own theme music when you're playing *Street Fighter*?

[They chuckle.]

00:03:12 Kamasi Guest

Yep. When I walk up to the arcade, they should play that and strike fear in all the—all the nerds.

[They laugh.]

00:03:19 Jesse Host

I mean, if you—at this point in your career, you could—you could probably afford to have a guy roll with you.

[Kamasi laughs.]

00:03:27 Kamasi Guest

And if you just have that guy, he could carry a tape deck.

00:03:31 Jesse Host

Yeah, with a—with a boom box. *[Laughs.]*
Fighting games are interesting to me, because the amount of focus it takes to execute the often really complicated things that are required—

00:03:43 Kamasi Guest

It's like learning an instrument.

00:03:44 Jesse Host

Yeah! That's what made me think of it. Like, it is kind of weirdly like learning an instrument.

00:03:49 Kamasi Guest

You have to practice, and you have to like stay on it, too. Like if you stop playing for a little while, like you kind of—you lose your stuff. It's intense. It's intense. And like it's one of those—it's very addictive. So, I always warn people like, it's fun! But if you are—if you have a competitive spirit kind of and like if you—if you're able to take things that aren't that serious and be serious about them—*[laughs]* which is—you know, I think that's like the personality type that gets into fighting games. Like—'cause it's not really a serious thing, but like it will ruin your day.

[They laugh.]

Like someone like—you get a bad beat. Like a bad a loss and it would like affect you. Like, you'd be like—you'd be sitting there eating dinner hours later. You're like, *[softly]* "I knew it. I knew—I

knew—I just knew he was gonna jump.” [Laughs.] “That’s why I did the dragon punch! ‘Cause he was going to jump! I knew—I felt like he did jump!” [Laughing.] You know.

00:04:48 Jesse Host I think in the video, you’re playing regular *Street Fighter II*, like on an arcade console. Is that your *Street Fighter*? ‘Cause there’s a bunch of them.

00:04:54 Kamasi Guest I played most of the *Street Fighters*, from *Street Fighter II* up until—yeah, right now I’m playing *Street Fighter V*.

00:04:59 Jesse Host Do you have a favorite character in *Street Fighter* to play?

00:05:03 Kamasi Guest Ryu has definitely been my like classic character throughout all the different games. I think since *Street Fighter II*.

00:05:09 Jesse Host I like the stretchy arms guy. That’s my favorite guy.

00:05:11 Kamasi Guest Oh, Dhalsim? Yeah. Yeah.

[Jesse confirms.]

I mean, I use—I mean, in *Street Fighter V*, I use—I use Blanka, as well and I use Kaido. Ryu got a little bit nerfed in this game. But I still use Ryu. I think he’s still a good character. I use a character called Falke, as well.

00:05:27 Jesse Host Have you ever been to one of these tournaments where somebody like rents a warehouse and people drive up trucks full of *Street Fighter II* consoles and like load them into the warehouse?

00:05:37 Kamasi Guest [Chuckles.] Yeah, I mean, I’ve been to Evo a few times. And, you know, for a minute—I mean, I have a few friends that are like professional *Street Fighter* players, so I would go to like Bar Fights, which is like a—like a fighting game tournament at a bar. I’ve been to quite a few tournaments. I mean, like I said, if you’re able to get behind the fact that like we are taking this much too seriously—you know—and just embrace it. Embrace it and be more serious about this and [laughing] talk about in more detail than you probably should and talk about frame data and, you know, all of those other things that we get into. It’s fun.

00:06:14 Jesse Host You know, I read an interview with your dad, who is also a musician, where he described that you were capable—even as a kid—of sitting down and playing piano for hours. You were the person in your family or in your generation of the family who, when you sat down at the piano, you stayed at the piano. That’s a little bit like that kind of focus that you need to play *Street Fighter* for hours.

00:06:45 Kamasi Guest Yeah, I definitely have an addictive personality. So, like... and I have a—like a long attention span. So, like I don’t get bored easily. You know? I can do—anything that I’m enjoying doing, I can do it for a long time. You know? So, yeah. I mean, I remember being a kid. I mean, I could—I could—you know, I could... I could sit around and like—I could also just sit around and daydream for a long time and just literally like stare out the window and have a whole little scene—movie play out in my head. I don’t know. It’s just—it’s part of, you know.

And so, when I got into music, it definitely was a benefit. Because it was like, you know—where it was like some kids have a hard time practicing. It was like, once I started practicing, I had a hard time stopping. You know? It was like once I got going, I didn’t wanna stop.

00:07:42 Jesse Host I imagine that it was your father who first put an instrument in your hand. Is that true?

[Kamasi confirms.]

00:07:52 Kamasi Guest Did you like it? I mean, were you too young to know the difference between liking it and not liking it?

00:08:17 Jesse Host Yeah, I mean, my first instrument was drums, and I was probably like three. So, I don't really—I mean, I remember getting the drum set. 'Cause I got it for my birthday. And... but it's hard for me to remember not having it. You know what I mean? I remember getting it, but trying to remember life before it, before music is kind of hard for to—you know. That's—it's super fuzzy.

00:08:28 Kamasi Guest Did you always want to do it in a serious way or was there a period—I mean, like there were things my dad wanted me to do, and I did not do any of them.

[They laugh.]

00:09:16 Jesse Host No, I wasn't—I wasn't really serious about it at first. You know? I had an older brother that was really kind of like a child prodigy. So, it was kind of his thing. You know. But I always liked music, but I wasn't like serious about it. You know? So, you know, I didn't really get serious about music until I started playing saxophone. Before that, you know, I liked music. I liked playing it. You know. I liked playing an instrument. It was fun. And I did it very much recreationally. You know? I'm around school like—everybody had the recorders, and I had a clarinet. *[Chuckles.]* And that—and that was just really, really cool. 'Cause, you know, it was so much cooler than a recorder.

[Jesse laughs.]

00:09:22 Kamasi Guest And probably the coolest a clarinet has ever been is when I brought my clarinet to school for music day and everybody else had recorders.

00:09:57 Jesse Host I was about to say, I think this is the first time since like 1967 that someone has announced how cool their clarinet is.

00:10:02 Kamasi Guest Oh, it was the coolest thing to all the other kids! You know, if you don't have a instrument—and I, you know, 'cause I—my dad—my dad had been giving me lessons, so I could—I could play. Like, I can play like—I remember, I knew all the—I knew a lot of the Boyz II Men songs on the clarinet. And like I knew some Jodeci songs, and I could play like some of the hooks from like NWA. I just knew radio songs on the clarinet. And it was a clarinet that was like wood and that I could play in any key. And then the recorder was like limited. It was—it was very much like—it was like an electric guitar compared to those recorders. You know? It was—it was pretty rock star.

00:10:08 Music Music Did you have a signature tune? I mean, was it like, "Wait until you hear my 'Lay Your Head on My Pillow'."

[Laughs.] What was it? No, no, no, it wasn't "Lay Your Head on Your Pillow", it was um... "If I Ever Fall in Love".

"If I Ever Fall in Love" from the album ... *If I Ever Fall in Love* by Shai.

*And if I ever (ever fall)
In love again (again)
I will be sure that the lady is a friend*

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

00:10:23 Kamasi Guest

[Humming a few notes along with the track.]

You know, I mean, I'm not gonna sing it right now because—yeah. Evidence of me singing that song, it's not necessary. Not necessarily the move. But. Yeah, that was like the song. Yeah.

00:10:35 Jesse Host

[Chuckles.] What happened when you started playing saxophone when you were 12?

00:10:39 Kamasi Guest

Well, a few—I think a year and half, two years before that I got into jazz. And—

00:10:45 Jesse Host

When you were like 10?

00:10:47 Kamasi Guest

10 or 11. Round in there somewhere.

00:10:49 Jesse Host

I think that might be unusual even in a household where your dad is a professional jazz musician.

00:10:54 Kamasi Guest

[Chuckles.] Well, it was in—I mean, my dad had been trying to get me into jazz. It felt late to him. You know? He was—he was like showing me ascensions and om and stuff like that when I was like five. So, I'm sure to him it was like—it felt like, "Finally! Geez!" You know? But when I got into jazz, you know, I was really into Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers. And Wayne Shorter and, you know, I'd got into like Charlie Parker.

00:11:19 Music Music

"Yardbird Suite" by Charlie Parker.

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

00:11:29 Kamasi Guest

I really like the saxophone. And my dad, since I had been playing clarinet the whole time, he kept telling me that the clarinet and the saxophone were the same thing. And so, I was trying to learn those songs on the clarinet. And it was like—first of all, they were just hard, like, to do. 'Cause they're not exactly the same and it just didn't sound the same and I was just like, "Man. That's just—that's just does not sound the same."

And he was like, "No, that's cause you haven't practiced." And I remember like getting the saxophone. Or he had a saxophone out one day and I just picked it up and I figured out how to play this song that I'd been playing on clarinet and all of the sudden it sounded like—I mean, I'm sure it didn't sound exactly like it, but.

[Chuckles.] It sounded like the records I had been listening to. And it was like, for that—you know, I admired great musicians and I liked good music. You know? I never thought that I could make music like the music that I liked. 'Cause I was—I hadn't found my voice. And it was like, when I found the saxophone, like, it was almost immediate. Like—it was like I could see it. It was like all the sudden like, "Oh! We're there. Right there? That's where you will be able to make music that you like—like the music that you enjoy."

And I was like, “Oh, wow! I could do that?” Like, “I could make a song that makes me feel the way I feel when I hear this Art Blakey record? I could do that?!” Like, “Oh, wow.” And then I was just hooked. You know? All that addictive personality. Like 97% of it went *[laughing]* right into the saxophone and music. Yeah.

00:13:02 Jesse Host What were you excited about—about like Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers when you were 12 or 11?

00:13:09 Kamasi Guest It was the feel. I don’t know. It had a—it had this kind of like hard like kind of exciting feel to it that just resonated with me. You know? And you know, there was that—there was that Tribe Called Quest song that had the Art Blakey sample on it.

00:13:23 Music Music “Excursions” from the album *The Low End Theory* by A Tribe Called Quest.

*We gotta make moves (word)
Never, ever, ever could we fake moves
(come on, come on)
We gotta make moves*

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

00:13:30 Kamasi Guest My cousin gave me this tape that had all his Art Blakey songs and that was one of them.

00:13:34 Jesse Host That does feel like a secret when you hear that.

00:13:37 Kamasi Guest Yeah! You’re like, “What’s that? This is—” You know? And then the rest of the song comes in and you’re like, “Oh! Wow!” You know. I didn’t even know—I don’t think I was really fully aware that hip-hop was sampling. *[Laughs.]* At that point. I don’t know if I was really, fully aware of what that meant. You know?

00:13:54 Jesse Host I mean, I remember how much it blew my mind when I heard “People Everyday” by Arrested Development.

[Kamasi agrees with a laugh.]

00:14:06 Kamasi Guest And I was like, “Oh! I know that song! That’s a—that’s that Sly and the Family Stone song my mom loves!” You know?
[Laughs.] Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. It was definitely like that. And then—you know, it made it cool. You know? It instantly made it cool, and it took it—it like—it took it away from my dad and it gave it to me. You know? And so, like I didn’t—I no longer looked at it like it was his. It was mine. You know? His whole record collection was no longer his. It was mine.

[They laugh.]

You know what I mean? I started like—you know, I moved the records and *[laughs]* you know. And it was like—you know, it was kind of funny. Like they were literally like in a different place, and I like—I took them outside to where I used to practice and stuff, and I took the whole record player. And yeah. He came out in a panic like, “Somebody stole the record player!” Like, no. No. I just moved it.

[They laugh.]

00:14:46 Jesse Host When you were a kid, did you think your dad's music career was cool?

00:14:51 Kamasi Guest My older brother may remember it a little better than me. I was pretty young when my dad made the decision not to go—not to tour anymore.

00:14:58 Jesse Host He was a public-school teacher.

00:14:59 Kamasi Guest Yeah. Yeah. He wanted to stay home. He didn't wanna be out on the road, didn't want to—because he didn't want—my parents divorced. So, that was when I was about three. I used to always want my dad to go out and play more. Like especially by the time that I was playing music. I always knew he was talented and I—you know, I was such a like a—I was a pretty adventurous kid. So, like, by the time I was 13, 14 I was out in the streets. *[Laughs.]* You know, playing in jam sessions. Doing gigs and stuff. And my dad had kind of like—at that point, by that point, he had been teaching so long and kind of like removed himself from the scene so much that he wasn't playing that much. You know?

And so, I used to really want him to go out and like play. And he was like, "I gotta go to work in the morning." You know. He was like, "You can—you can sleep through class, but I can't." You know? *[Chuckles.]* And I was appreciative of the fact that he did make that sacrifice. I just always wished that he would get out and play more. 'Cause that was—it's been cool for me like, you know, having him out on the road with us. You know, 'cause it's kind of like now he is. You know?

00:16:08 Jesse Host Was it difficult for you to have this thing that you are really passionate about that your dad was a professional of?

00:16:18 Kamasi Guest No, because like I said before, I mean, he wasn't—he wasn't really out. Like, I was out much more. I remember, we had a moment actually once where—I was really active when I was a kid. You know, I was like—I don't even know how I did all the stuff that I was doing. And I ended up having a gig with one of my dad's friends. And so, my dad's friend calls the house, and this is like before anyone had cell phones. So, he calls the house. My dad answers. And they're just kind of chopping it up. And he's like, "Yeah, so, um... is Kamasi there?" *[Laughs.]*

And he was like, "Uuuh, yeah. Yeah, he's here."

He's like, "Oh, can I talk to him real quick?"

And he sees me like get the phone and I'm like writing down the information for the gig and he was like, "Did you just steal my gig, Kamasi?"

[They laugh.]

I was like, "Your gig? Wait, you played with him too?" I was like, "Alright. I didn't—you know. I didn't even know." You know. So, I mean like—he was—he was pretty good about giving me, you know, my space, musically. You know? He wasn't really like at every gig. I mean, he'd come to the gigs that he thought—that I felt like were important for him to be at. But like, you know. I mean, a

lot of the times, I had to figure out how to get there and home. Like it wasn't—I mean, I've benefited from the fact that I haven't—I have like six brothers and sisters. So, it wasn't like all eyes on me. And I was like—I probably had the least problems of all of my siblings. You know? So, it was like my parents kind of looked at me like, "Kamasi's kind of alright. I don't know what I'm gonna do with [chuckles]—I mean, what am I gonna do with this dude right here?" You know?

So, you know, I kind of had both. You know, I'm like—if I needed some help with music, I could always go ask my dad like, you know. But even like—it was weird, 'cause it was like I had other friends that had like private lessons, and it was like a really like regimented thing. Like, on Tuesdays on Thursdays I go to this guy, and he tells me what to do. My dad didn't really tell me what to do. You know. He just like, "Here's a whole stack of books. Music books that have everything you will need to know about music. Here's a whole big old record collection. Here's any instrument you would even wanna play. Have at it!" You know? And it was just like anything that I didn't understand, like, "Hey. I don't understand what a—you know, half diminished—was the difference between a half diminish and a folded diminish?"

[Mumbling his words together.] "This is the difference between a half diminished and a fully diminished."

"Ooh! Okay." You know. "What's a sharp 11?"

"This is what that means." You know? So, it was kind of like a—it was like a very—it felt like a very natural relationship with it. You know? So, I didn't have that sense of someone driving me. You know?

00:19:03 Jesse Host Your adolescence was in the early and mid-'90s. And you grew up in south LA. Did you have to make a choice at some point in your life that you were gonna be the kind of guy that plays music and plays video games and not have a street life?

00:19:21 Kamasi Guest Yeah. It happened pretty early for me. And I don't think people realize that, sometimes. Like that identity that like you're a gangster, when you grow up in that neighborhood, it attached itself to you really young. Way before you ever do anything that a gangster would do. I was fortunate—and it was weird, 'cause I had two great parents, college educated parents and like I had no real reason to fall into that. You know? Other than just my self-image from the outside was pushing me into something that I didn't really have on the inside. And I had these guys that came to my school and they—and they really taught us about the true nature of our history and where we come from and who we are and like what my true potential is. And kind of just showed me that, you know, "You think you wanna be this, but this is what this really is. Do you wanna be that? Or do you wanna be this?"

And like, when you give someone that choice, it kind of immediately just shifts you. And right around that same time, I found music. And music—like, when I found my love for music, it's like—it really is like

falling in love with a person. You know? It's like you don't want to—I never wanted to do anything else. You know? So, it's like—it wasn't a hard decision like, "Ooh, man. I really wanna be in the streets but I should be a good person." You know? It was like, "All I really wanna do—I wake up in the morning thinking about this music. I wake—I go—you know, I go to sleep thinking about it. I'm thinking about it all day long. Like, I'm so preoccupied with this, I can't even really—like, what do you wanna go do? You wanna go spray-paint up some wall or—? I—no, I'm good, man." Like, you know. "You wanna fight somebody? No, I'm cool, man."

You know? It encompassed me and it was so—I was—I was fortunate in that sense, that it caught me right at that crossroads where a lot of kids get kind of swept into something that they really have no real intention of being in. You know? Like 'cause you're so young that you don't even understand what you're getting yourself into until it's too late. And now you're 16,17, and the world is looking at you like you're an adult and you're into this thing that you didn't know that you were getting into. You know? And so, like, fortunately for me when I was like 10 or 11, someone came along and swept me out of it. At the same time, I found something that gave me another identity for myself. So, it was—it was not a hard thing for me to do.

00:21:49 Jesse Host

You were playing in a jazz band. Like playing shows when you were a teenager. Did you always imagine a career in jazz?

00:22:02 Kamasi Guest

Jazz was definitely the first music that—that was my first love in music. But pretty early on, I was always playing like—literally like the day that I switched to the saxophone and my dad was like, "Alright, this weekend we're gonna go play at your uncle's church."

[Jesse chuckles.]

So, like I immediately—and you know, it was 'cause of jazz, but I immediately had a gospel to the story. You know? And I already had hip-hop kind of was like the soundtrack of my generation, my friends. Everybody was into that. And then, so I started playing saxophone in eighth grade and then, when I went to ninth grade, I switched school. I went to Hamilton, which was like a music academy. And so, all of the sudden, I'm meeting these classical musicians who are like really into classical music. And then I developed a love of classical music. So, I don't think that—I don't think I was thinking about a career in that sense. I just really liked music. I just wanted to make really good music and jazz was probably my favorite of all the music that I was making.

00:23:03 Jesse Host

Even more with Kamasi Washington. Stay with us. When we come back from a break, we'll talk about one of his first paying gigs: playing in the band of one Snoop Doggy Dogg. It's *Bullseye*, from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

00:23:16 Music Transition

Cheerful, relaxed music.

00:23:18 Jesse Promo

Support for *Bullseye* and the following message come from Culturelle. Culturelle wants you to know that an estimated 45 million Americans may have IBS, according to the International Foundation for Gastrointestinal Disorders. Culturelle IBS Complete Support is a medical food for the dietary management of IBS. It's designed to

relieve symptoms like abdominal pain, bloating, diarrhea, and constipation in a safe, well-tolerated, once daily dose. Save 20% with promo code “radio” on Culturelle.com.

00:23:57	Promo	Clip	<p><i>[Music fades out.]</i> Music: Playful piano music.</p> <p>Peter Sagal: Hey! It’s Peter Sagal, host of <i>Wait Wait... Don’t Tell Me!</i> After a year and a half broadcasting from our bedrooms, we are returning to shows with real, live audiences starting August 5th in Philadelphia. Don’t worry, we will still have our beds on stage with us. Join us!</p>
00:24:11	Music	Music	<p><i>[Music ends.]</i> “The Psalmnist” from the album <i>Heaven and Earth</i> by Kamasi Washington.</p>
00:24:14	Jesse	Host	<p><i>[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue.]</i> It’s <i>Bullseye</i>. I’m Jesse Thorn. My guest, Kamasi Washington, is a saxophonist and composer. He’s collaborated with Kendrick Lamar, Run the Jewels, Flying Lotus, and many others. When we talked in 2018, he had just released the album <i>Heaven and Earth</i>. This track we’re hearing right now is from that album. It’s called “The Psalmnist”.</p>
00:24:34	Music	Music	<p><i>[Volume increases.]</i></p>
00:24:47	Jesse	Host	<p><i>[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.]</i> One of your first real jobs, as a musician, was playing in Snoop Dogg’s band. When you got that call, that must have been a mind blower! Like—</p>
00:25:11	Kamasi	Guest	<p><i>[Kamasi confirms.]</i> Snoop Dogg is Snoop Dogg! No matter—I mean, you could be anyone in America! Snoop Dogg is Snoop Dogg. You know what I mean? Much less to be—to be a guy from LA. Oh yeah. And southcentral LA. It was like—it was pretty like surreal. It was one of those moments where you’re like—you’re—I definitely didn’t expect it. You know. I mean, I had been gigging around the city a lot, you know, as a kid. And Terrace, before that Terrace had—he did a tour with Kink Franklin.</p>
00:25:35	Jesse	Host	<p>That’s a gospel superstar. And Terrace Martin, we should say, is both a pretty accomplished jazz musician and a very accomplished hip-hop producer as well.</p>
00:25:43	Kamasi	Guest	<p>Yeah, yeah. I mean, like, he was—he was definitely like ahead of his—he was—he was ahead of the pack in a lot of ways. You know, just like—I remember like when we were kids, he was—he had his own band, like before us. And it was like, “Aw man.” Like, that—he was like always kind of pushing forward. You know? And so, he was the first one of us to like—with the NPC and started like producing and like making tracks and like making the music for hip-hop. Like we all listened to it, but I hadn’t really thought of like trying to play hip-hop music. You know? It was like it existed on a different</p>

platform from me. It was like, oh, if I go to a party. Or I'm—you know, I mean, I'm riding around in my car. You know, someone's car, you listen to it. But he was like making that music. You know?

- 00:26:32 Jesse Host And I remember he—I remember he met Battlecat. Who's a legendary west coast hip-hop producer who worked extensively with Snoop Dogg.
- 00:26:37 Kamasi Guest Yeah. And I remember hearing about that. And he was, you know. So, like, that was a big deal. It was like, "Daaang. You're working with Battlecat? That's dope." And yeah, and then when he called us, he was like, "Man, Snoop—" 'Cause first it wasn't the tour. It was just one gig. It was like Snoop was doing *The Tonight Show* and he wants a horn section.
- And it was like, "Oh, snap!" And so, we went, and did it and I remember Snoop walking off the set and he was like, "I'm taking the band on tour with me." And we all looked at each other like, "I hope that means us as well."
- [They cackle.]*
- 'Cause you know, the horns are the first ones to get fired. *[Laughs.]* When the budget gets low, we get nervous. And so, yeah. And he did. He, you know—he took us all on the road and it was—I remember like, the first time, you know, Snoop said, "Hey, what's up, Kamasi?"
- And I was like, "Daaang! Snoop knows my name. That's crazy." You know? And then like, you know, we were playing *Madden* and you know just hanging out and it was like, "Wow." This is kinda—this is—you know, someone that I looked up to so much and that I listen to and idolized when I was kid. You know, especially like before I started—I played saxophone. I was really, really into like Snoop and Dre. That was like it for me. You know?
- 00:27:53 Jesse Host You must have learned a lot about creating the aesthetics of hip-hop when you were playing in a hip-hop band. You can really tell the difference between a band that gets what hip-hop is and a band that is just a perfectly good band. *[Chuckles.]*
- 00:28:13 Kamasi Guest Yeah, yeah. No, it was—it was a big learning experience for me. 'Cause it, like I said before, like it was the music that I listened to, but I never really tried to play. And I never really investigated like what's a hip-hop musician? What does that mean? Like what does it mean to play—to play this music live? You know? 'Cause it was such a—my association was with a DJ, hip-hop with a DJ. It wasn't like—I didn't associate it with a live band like that.
- 00:28:50 Jesse Host Even though, you know, I'm coming to find out that a lot of that stuff was live musicians replaying stuff and playing over stuff. You know. Yeah, Dr. Dre had kind of pioneered the art of bringing in session musicians to replay a record so that he only had to license the rights to the song and not the rights to the recording.

[Kamasi affirms.]

00:29:05 Kamasi Guest In order to use a sample in a song.
Yeah. Yeah. And so, when we get to that—when I—when I, you know, we get to the first rehearsal—it was one of those things where it was like I had been studying music so much, and so much technically difficult music, that I thought that I was gonna be fine. And then all of the sudden, you get—you get there and it's like their perspective on what it means to play something right is completely different. It's like it's 50/50 what notes you're playing and the other 50% is how you play it. Like literally, like you could play the right notes and they would look at you like... *[Beat.]*

00:29:55 Jesse Host *[Stammering.]* I just—"That's what you told me to play!"
I mean, one of the things about hip-hop beat making is guys who do that and women who do that are obsessed with the qualities of sounds.
[Kamasi agrees.]
So, like, they're interested but depending on who it is, they may or may not be interested in the kind of traditional musical stuff. You know. Sometimes they're well-versed in it, sometimes less so. But the quality of, you know, you get three hip-hop producers in a room, and they would gladly argue for five hours about a single snare sound.
[Kamasi confirms.]
Like with no problem. Whereas, in most bands it's like, "Oh, yeah. As long as there's a high hat on the eighth note," or whatever it is, "then you're doing it right."
00:30:40 Kamasi Guest Yeah, exactly. Like if you're a drummer and if your snare drum is not tuned right, they'll look at you like you're dropping the beat. Or if you're a bass player and your bass is not super fat and like—you know, like these things are like not mildly important but like majorly important. So, at the horn section, it was like—like the phrasing and your tone quality and like the feel of how you play what they wanted you to play, was super important. You know? And so, it made me kind of thing about music differently. You know?
And then you had people like, you know—everyone in that band pretty much was a producer. And so, all of the sudden, the conversations that you're around get like that. Like sounds. You know. Records and like understanding the importance of a feel—you know, how something feels. I had that subconsciously, but I wasn't consciously ever thinking of it. And all of the sudden, I'm in this scenario where like I have to be very conscious of it. Like what is this feel? Like where should we place these three notes that they wanted us to play? That carried over, actually, to how I place jazz. It was like all of the sudden now I'm playing 100 notes, but I still feel the need to put that same care that I put on the three notes over these 100 notes. You know?
And that's when I started to then hear like the jazz musicians that we love, like, "Oh, they're doing that!" It doesn't matter how

			<p>complicated it is; they never lost sight of this other side of the music. You know? And I really learned that from playing with Snoop.</p>
00:32:18	Jesse	Host	<p>I'm not a musician, but it seems like it would also be a different kind of listening when you're playing. Particularly because, in jazz music—especially when you're playing relatively casually—one of the things that's happening often is that there is a—there is a soloist and there is a band supporting the soloist and the soloist is doing their thing and often improvisatorially.</p> <p><i>[Kamasi agrees with a chuckle.]</i></p>
00:33:13	Kamasi	Guest	<p><i>[Sighs.]</i> My. What a word. Um, improvisatorially, and in hip-hop, you know, your fealty is towards creating a very sharp, very coherent beat, because it's gotta move people in a very specific way. And your soloist is always—I mean, maybe you guys got a solo in the Snoop show, but basically the soloist is always gonna be the MC. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, and there's that and there's also—you're playing records—I mean, with Snoop, you're playing hits. So, you're playing records that people looove and they know and like it's... a different mentality you have to have, of like you have to really—'cause jazz is so much about self-expression. It's so much about showing who you are. And this scenario is about creating the sound. You know? It's not about you. You know? And like—and that... that's an important switch to kind of be able to like have, to like, "Okay, I'm gonna—yeah. I could play a lot of stuff, but that's not what this needs." And to kind of really just take you out of the equation and really put, above everything, this—like you said—this thing that is being created by all of us at the same time. This.</p> <p>And Snoop was a part of that. You know? He was the face of it, but he was still part of it. It was like—it's very much like all these things have to line up and link up perfectly together to make it feel that way that's gonna make everyone feel that way. You know? And so, it was... it's just as difficult in its own way. Even though you're only playing three notes, your three notes have to fit perfectly in this thing that has a bass player, the drums, a DJ, a rapper, the keyboards, guitars. Everything has to fit in exactly perfectly. And you can't fit in exactly perfectly just by playing the right notes.</p>
00:35:03	Jesse	Host	<p>Even more still to come with Kamasi Washington. We'll be back in a minute. It's <i>Bullseye</i>, from MaximumFun.org and NPR.</p>
00:35:10	Music	Transition	<p>Funky electronic music.</p>
00:35:12	Jesse	Host	<p>This message comes from NPR sponsor Discover. Discover matches all the cashback you earn on your credit card at the end of your first year, automatically. With no limit on how much you can earn. It's amazing because of all the places where Discover is accepted. 99% of places in the US that take credit cards. So, when it comes to Discover, get used to hearing "yes" more often. Learn more at Discover.com/match. 2021 Neilson Report. Limitations apply.</p>
00:35:47	Promo	Clip	<p><i>[Music fades out.]</i> Music: Upbeat, brassy music.</p>

Annabelle Gurwitch: Hi! I'm Annabelle Gurwitch

Laura House: And I'm Laura House.

Annabelle: And we're the hosts of *Tiny Victories*.

Caller 1: My tiny victory is that I sewed that button back on the day after it broke.

Annabelle: We talk about that little thing that you did that's a big deal to you but nobody else cares. Did you get that Guggenheim Genius Award?

Laura: We don't wanna hear from you!

Annabelle: We want little, bitty, tiny victories!

Caller 2: My tiny victory is a tattoo that I added onto this past weekend.

Laura: Let's talk about it!

Caller 3: My victory is that I'm one year cancer free. But my tiny victory is that I took all of the cushions off the couch, pounded them out, put them back, and it looks so great.

Laura: So, if you're like us and you wanna celebrate the tiny achievements of ordinary people, listen to *Tiny Victories*.

Annabelle: It's on every Monday on MaximumFun.

[Music fades out.]

00:36:34 Music Transition
00:36:39 Jesse Host

Rolling electronic tones.

It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. I'm talking with the musician Kamasi Washington. He recorded the acclaimed solo albums *The Epic* and *Heaven and Earth*. He has also worked with people like Robert Glasper, Kendrick Lamar, and Thundercat. Let's get back into it.

You played on Kendrick Lamar's album, *To Pimp a Butterfly*, and I have to say like when I first heard that record, I thought—the thought that I had, it's like as a big fan of hip-hop and a big fan of jazz music, it's like, "Oh, someone finally made it work for real." Like, there plenty of hip-hop records that sample jazz records and essentially transform them into hip-hop music that are great. And there's plenty of jazz music that's influenced by hip-hop music that's wonderful. And there's plenty of overlap and relationship between the two. But often I feel like that aesthetic disjuncture—that difference between them—is really hard to bridge. And when I heard that record, I was like, "Oh! This works perfectly!"

[Kamasi agrees.]

Like, this is exactly right!

00:37:47 Kamasi Guest Well, one—like, I mean that there’s a couple things. I think that, like you said, hip-hop and jazz have always been kind of intertwined, but it was—jazz was—one, it was intertwined on the level of being a sample. And two, it was meant to be masked to not be jazz. You know? Like Dre’s putting jazz stuff in there, but it’s—he did it in a way that’s—if you didn’t know the record, you just wouldn’t know that that’s what that was. You know what I mean? It’s like sometimes you hear those samples and it’s like, “Damn! That’s where that comes from.” *[Chuckling.]* You know what I mean?

Kendrick took the approach of putting it in the forefront, like, “I’m not trying to take this jazz and turn it into hip-hop or funk. I’m gonna leave it jazz.” Right there, it has that. And! “I’m not sampling it. I’m going to get musicians to play it and create it new music that feels like that. I’m not—it’s not in the background.” And that was the big—to me, the major innovation that he did was like I’m gonna take this thing that’s usually put in the background and masked to that—to the point where that, if you don’t really know, you won’t even know that it’s there. You know? That why I liked *[inaudible]*. It was the first time I ever heard jazz with hip-hop.

I was like, “No, come on, you hear jazz in hip-hop all the time!” But it’s not meant to feel like jazz. Kendrick is like, “I’m gonna make it feel like jazz.” And he’s such a artist that he can make it feel like it fits, as well. You know?

00:39:12 Jesse Host And it’s kind of a community that you grew up in.

[Kamasi confirms.]

I mean, you ended up on the—when you ended up on this record, correct me if I’m wrong, but you didn’t know Kendrick Lamar before you went in there.

[Kamasi confirms.]

00:39:29 Kamasi Guest But you knew these guys that you had worked with making jazz records for, at this point, 15 years, maybe more. Probably 20 years. *[Laughs.]* 20 to 25. Yeah! And then we grew up—and we grew up in Leimert Park, like around, you know like *[inaudible]* and being on The World Stage. And then right around the corner, is Project Blowed. And so, we grew up—you know—really admiring like Freestyle Fellowship and—you know, Pharcyde and all those guys. And they were like right around the corner from where we’d play jazz.

00:39:54 Jesse Host Those are LA hip-hop groups that really led the way in innovating the kind of possibilities of the aesthetics of rapping, basically.

00:40:03 Kamasi Guest Yeah. Yeah. And, you know—and they were totally into—this was like Horace Tapscott and Freestyle Fellowship were intertwined and *[fumbles for words with a laugh]*. You know what I mean? It was like—and for us, for those that were coming underneath them, you know, it was like they were the same thing. Yeah. And so, I think that, you know, Kendrick coming from that, too. You know, he’s coming from Compton, but he was—you know. He knew that scene. And, you know, people like Terrace and all those other

guys—that whole scene, you know, it kind of—like you said, it's like it—Kendrick took it and put it—and like this is how this can really be. You know? And it takes bravery to do that. Like to—you know—let Terrace take a *[chuckles]* you know, a real intense saxophone solo. You know, it's the second song. Third song of a really mainstream hip-hop record. Takes courage, you know?

00:40:59 Jesse Host

I wanna hear a little bit of my guest, Kamasi Washington, on Kendrick Lamar's album, *To Pimp a Butterfly*. This song is called "U".

00:41:09 Music Music

"U" from the album *To Pimp a Butterfly* by Kendrick Lamar.

*I cry myself to sleep, everything is your fault
Faults breaking to pieces, earthquakes on every weekend
Because you shook as soon as you knew confinement was needed
I know your secrets, don't let me tell 'em to the world
About that shit you thinking and that time you—I'm 'bout to hurl
I'm— up, but I ain't as— up as you
You just can't get right; I think your heart made of bullet proof
Should've killed your— long time ago*

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

00:41:34 Jesse Host

When you started making your own records, did you already have an idea of what was gonna be different and special about them? I mean, was it like something that you'd been saving up?

00:41:46 Kamasi Guest

Yes, I mean, for me—when I started playing with Snoop, all of the sudden, you know, around that time period in my life, I started really gigging a lot and I was—it was I had probably 60/40. Like 60% was non-jazz. 40% of what I was doing was jazz. And—and right, we came back from a loong Snoop tour. Like maybe like we were out for maybe like two months or something like that. And I was like, "Man, I have to start making my own music. 'Cause I'm spending so much of my time making music for other people. I don't wanna get lost. I don't wanna lose myself. This is not—" I didn't get into music for... blue collar reasons. Like, I really wanna make—create music. And so, it's cool to make music for other people. But one, like to not fall in the pitfall of trying to force in my own musical ideas into whatever you're doing. You know? So, I can be a good professional musician and that like, "I'm gonna give you what you want." I need to have my own outlet. You know?

And so, I—you know, and that was around the time that people really started—the home studio became a real possibility. And so, it was—at first, like a—I had to just maintain myself, because I'm—you know, a bit in demand and I was playing with Snoop. I was playing with Lauryn Hill. I was playing with Raphael Saadiq. I was playing with Stanley Clarke and Chaka Khan and Jared Wilson and all these other people. And it was like—I was like a regular at LAX. *[Chuckles.]* You know? It was like I just had to like have an outlet to be able to maintain like who I am. That's—I make some music that's exactly the way that I wanna do it. And that way, it was twofold. Like, one, I could maintain myself and still like be able to—'cause I felt like if you're gonna make music for someone else, you

gotta make it for them and give them what they want and not try to, you know, push their hand one way or the other. You know?

So. It started off as that. And then—and I made a few records like—just that. Just basically like, “Well, here’s what I sound like now.” You know? I didn’t really think of them as like something I was really trying to release. It was just something I wanted to make. You know? And then, Lotus asked me to make a record for “Brainfeeder”. And that was the first time I really thought about like making the record that is like, “This is my album. This is like what my contribution to music is.” Not just like a functionary thing that’s like—I need to like document where I’m at and have some place to be me. This is like, “Okay. Now, make something that you will feel like is your contribution.” You know? And that was the first time I had that thought. And, for me then, it was like, “Well.” I had to kind of figure out like who am I, musically? Like, who am I?

And, you know, I felt like I had the side of myself that was like a instrumentalist—you know, that played saxophone. And then I had the side of myself that’s a composer, that like made music. And so, I was trying to make a record. Then I made *The Epic*, that really showcased both of those two sides of who I am. And then, the third component was just well, what do you think about the world? You know? And then—so, that’s kind of like where I’ve been with my records, just trying to show who I am, musically, and who I am, beyond music.

00:45:37 Jesse Host

Let’s hear some music from my guest, Kamasi Washington’s, album *The Epic*, from 2015. This song is called “Misunderstanding”. “Misunderstanding” from the album *The Epic* by Kamasi Washington.

00:45:44 Music Music

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

00:46:11 Jesse Host

It’s funny, you know, James Brown was famous for touring with two drummers and the reason—and I—my mom had an old friend who used to play drums for James Brown, and he told me with once when I was a teenager, made me a big impact. He’d always tour with two drummers so he could fire one whenever he wanted.

[They chuckle.]

Like, it gave him a buffer. And when you did that tour—when you did the tour for *The Epic*, you had doubles of a lot of people in your—you brought a big band. But I read an interview where you said—and I thought it was really fascinating—one of the reasons, for example, that you brought two drummers was that when you’re in the rhythm section of a jazz band, the expectation is so powerful that you’re holding it down, essentially, that by having two drummers, you gave your drummers the opportunity to have the breathing room to express themselves.

And that is such a—that struck me as such a beautiful idea. I mean, an expensive idea, for you.

[They laugh.]

00:47:28 Kamasi Guest

'Cause you're the one writing the checks when your name's on the—when your name's on the billboard or whatever. But—or on the marquee. But that's a really beautiful idea.

Yeah. Yeah. It kind of happened on accident. I mean, basically what happened is we had a—we had this—this was the time where we were all touring. Like, so the same thing that happened to me happened to all my friends. Like, they got out of high school and then everybody was in demand. Everybody was getting pulled in a million different directions. So, we used to joke that like getting us all in a room together was like getting the planets to align. You know? And so, we had this regular gig at this place called 5th Street Dicks. And so, and you know I would come off tour and whenever I was off tour, we would start back up playing at 5th Street Dicks. And so, we were back, and we were supposed to play this one night and the band was supposed to be Cameron, Ronald Bruner, and Thundercat. [Chuckles.]

And all three of them canceled on me the day of the gig. And I gave them a hard time. I was like, you know, "This is bull[censored]!" Like, "How are you gonna cancel on me day of?" Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. I—you know, even I knew I could find somebody. I was just giving them a hard time. And so, I ended up calling Miles Mosley, Brandon Coleman, and Tony Austin. And somehow, they all came together, same day. You know, they all—both sets came. And when we played, everybody thought it was gonna be chaos. Well, what ended up happening is that—was that. Like it freed—someone in those positions had the freedom. You know? And so, like I felt like all those guys, all my friends, and the rhythm section of my crew always struggle between like wanting to just be creative and just be free and just make music and holding down their position in the rhythm section. You know? So, like people like Miles—you know, he struggled like playing like a bass player. 'Cause he wanted to almost play like a guitar/cello, you know, keyboard—like, he wanted to take crazy solos and do all of this stuff and play high and, you know, do all these things. And so did Thundercat.

But when you put them both together, what would happen is they were fine being in that position for a little while, but then they'd always wanna go loud. But they can just kind of switch back and forth. And so, all of the sudden, I was getting like more of the creativity and more of the solid. And I was like, "Oh! Well, this is kind of actually really, really dope." It was dope the very first time we did it. It was like—I was like, "Wow. That was really dope." And then I just kept it. And now I'm addicted to it and [chuckles] it's hard to—hard to go without it. You know?

The same thing happened with Cameron and Brandon. It was like all the sudden, you know, the keyboard player—like, you don't have to be so worried about like playing the chord changes, 'cause he's playing the chord changes. So, I can like create some other kind of

thing. You know, like Brandon could stop playing the chords and spend two minutes tinkering with his, you know, his Moog synthesizer and like create a really cool sound. You know? Because there's someone else—you know. And so, it just—it added such a huge amount of creativity. But then it is also the fact that, you know, drummers-wise, they—you know, guys are not always timely. So.

[They laugh.]

00:50:59 Jesse Host One of these dudes'll be at the gig on time. So. It takes a little bit of stress off. *[Laughs.]*
I mean, you're also a man who's not afraid of a 20-person choir. So. *[Chuckles.]*

[Kamasi confirms.]

You don't hear that many jazz records with the budgets they've got bringing in. *[Laughs.]*

00:51:13 Kamasi Guest *[Music fades in.]*
Yeah. Yeah. I mean, it's—you know, I've always been that way. I've always been the kind of person that liked kind of bringing people together. You know? Like my house was always the hangout spot, growing up. I'm always the one that's advocating for the afterparty. *[Laughs.]* Like, let's all go here! Everybody! You know what I mean? So, yeah. I think that that's part of it, too. You know. And then, you know, it's—yeah, as a composer, like the more voices you have it's like the more freedom you have.

00:51:43 Jesse Thorn Well, Kamasi Washington, we're out of time but I could talk to you about this stuff for forever. I love your music. Thank you so much for coming on *Bullseye*. It was great to meet you.

00:51:51 Kamasi Guest Aw, man! Thanks for having me.

00:51:52 Music Music "Clair de Lune" from the album *The Epic* by Kamasi Washington.

[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue.]

00:52:07 Jesse Host Kamasi Washington from 2018. If you haven't heard his music, go seek out more of it now. 2015's *The Epic* is already a classic. It's almost three hours long and will not disappoint you. Kamasi has a handful of tour dates coming up all over North America, this fall. Go to the *Bullseye* page at MaximumFun.org for dates and more info. Before we go, let's take a listen to one more track from Kamasi Washington: a classic from *The Epic*, "Clair de Lune".

00:52:34 Music Music *[Volume increases.]*

[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue.]

00:52:56 Jesse Host That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye* is created out of the homes of me and the staff of Maximum Fun, in and around greater Los Angeles, California—where, just the other night around 9:30PM, my recording was interrupted *[chuckles]* by the signature tinkle of an ice cream truck. And I'm not gonna lie, I was not mad at it. I like to hear an ice cream truck any time, even at 9:30 at night.

Our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Senior producer, Kevin Ferguson. Producer, Jesus Ambrosio. Production fellows at Maximum Fun are Richard Robey and Valerie Moffatt. We get help from Casey O'Brien. Our interstitial music is by Dan Wally, also known as DJW. Our theme song is by The Go! Team. Thanks very much to them and to their label, Memphis Industries, for sharing it.

You can keep up with the show on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. We post all our interviews there. And I think that's about it. Just remember: all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

00:53:58 Promo Promo

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

[Music fades out.]