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| 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. |
| 00:00:14 | Jesse Thorn | Host | <p><i>[Music fades out.]</i></p> <p>It's <i>Bullseye</i>. I'm Jesse Thorn. Michael K Williams, the actor, died earlier this month. He was 54. To the many of us who were fans of his work, the news was quite a gut punch. A headline or a push notification or a text from a friend on an otherwise quiet Labor Day. That's in part because of how William's work has affected us. He was known for playing Omar Little on <i>The Wire</i>. Omar was—and I don't think this is controversial to say—easily the best character on one of the best TV shows of all time. Omar was a stickup man. He lived both outside the law and under constant threat of retaliation from the drug dealers he robbed. He took his grandma to church. He was deeply in love with his boyfriend, Brandon, who was an iconic character.</p> <p>But Michael K Williams added something unique to the role. In the midst of a stickup, he carried himself with a macho swagger, a crooked smile, and a killer one-liner. And in the next scene, it all falls apart. He'd be tender, vulnerable. You felt his pain. Then there's Michael's personal story. He began his career in entertainment in fits and starts. First, he was a dancer in New York, then an actor with a handful of walk-on credits. By the time he auditioned for <i>The Wire</i>, he was in his mid-30s. He'd lived a whole life. He didn't go to acting school. He didn't come from money. Williams went on to more roles of course. He played Chalky White on <i>Boardwalk Empire</i>. He had small but memorable parts in movies like <i>The Road</i>, <i>Inherent Vice</i>, <i>12 Years a Slave</i>, among others.</p> <p>When I talked to him in 2016, he was starring in a really good show called <i>Hap and Leonard</i>. He played Leonard; a Vietnam vet turned private investigator. The show aired for three seasons on the Sundance channel, if you wanna check it out. When Michael K Williams died earlier this month, he was in the middle of an impressive and beautiful acting career. There's never been anyone like Williams onscreen and there never will be again. As I said, I got to talk to him in 2016. When we heard the news about Williams's passing, we went into the archives to listen back to our conversation. What you're about to hear is a mix of some stuff we played already and a lot of stuff that we haven't.</p> <p>At some points in the interview, you'll notice that he sounds like he's coming through a telephone. That's because he is. When we talked with Michael, he was using a studio in New York. We weren't able to recover all of Michael's original studio recording, but we had his phone audio as a backup.</p> <p><i>[Music fades in.]</i></p> <p>So, let's get into it: my interview with the late Michael K Williams.</p> |
| 00:02:50 | Music | Transition | <p>Relaxed, jazzy music with a steady beat.</p> <p><i>[Music continues under the dialogue then fades out.]</i></p> |

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| 00:02:58 | Jesse | Host | Michael K Williams, welcome to <i>Bullseye</i> . |
| 00:03:01 | Michael K Williams | Guest | Thanks, man. Thank you. |
| 00:03:02 | Jesse | Host | You were—you were a club kid when you were a kid, right? |
| 00:03:06 | Michael | Guest | Yeah. Yeah. <i>[Chuckles.]</i> I was the—I was the one with the loud, floral shirt on and, you know, the high-top fade and—you know, he wore his suspenders backwards with these enormously gaudy looking shoes. I was that dude. |
| 00:03:24 | Jesse | Host | When did you start going to clubs? How old were you? |
| 00:03:27 | Michael | Guest | Oh, I was way underage, man. Um. My first like adult club I went to—I had to be somewhere around 16 years old. |
| 00:03:36 | Jesse | Host | What kind of music were you dancing to? |
| 00:03:39 | Michael | Guest | I grew up like in—like, you know, music to dance to—you know, I liked the Bee Gees. I loved the Jackson 5. I grew up with that Philly sound, that Gamble and Huff, that hustle music. You know, disco, whatever you wanna call it. You know. I call it that feel-good music. You know, <i>Love is the Message</i> , and so I always gravitated towards upbeat tempo, up tempo beats and, you know, huge lyrics and you know, that kind of migrated to what we now know as house music and—you know, to my knowledge. So, I kind of went that way. You know? That was my thing. That's why I homed in on my dance skills, actually. |
| 00:04:20 | Jesse | Host | When you were like a teenager and in your early 20s, like how many nights a week were you going out? |
| 00:04:26 | Michael | Guest | You know, 'cause it is and always has been a weekday kind of city. So, I mean, like Tuesdays, Thursdays—you know, you might find a hot spot on a Monday. You know, a Sunday. But like Friday and Saturday, we usually gave that to the—you know, what we referred to as the bridge and tunnelers. |
| 00:04:46 | Jesse | Host | <i>[Laughs.]</i> You didn't wanna deal with that Jersey City nonsense. |
| 00:04:51 | Michael | Guest | Uh, you know. <i>[Chuckles.]</i> Shoutout to Jersey. Newark. <i>[Laughs.]</i> |
| 00:04:57 | Jesse | Host | When did you think that, you know, dancing in a club could be more than just a thing you did a few nights a week for fun and could actually be a job? |
| 00:05:12 | Michael | Guest | Wow, I think you're the first person that ever asked me that. One night, there was a—Heather Hunter, the ex-porn star, she's a very good friend of mine. When I first met her, she was branching out into doing music and she had a—she had a gig at this club in New York called The Sound Factory Bar. And in the 11 th hour, her dancers backed out. And she was contracted—you know—to have—to be onstage a certain amount of time with a certain, you know, level of stage show, stage performance. And she was freaking out. And she and I had a mutual friend in common. He called me. She called him, he called me, and I was like, "Wait a minute. Heather Hunter, the legendary porn star, wants to get me in my favorite club for free, let me do what I love to do the most on a stage where I don't have to worry about nobody getting in my way? And I'm getting paid?! <i>[Snorts.]</i> " I was like, "Where do I sign up?" |
| 00:06:21 | Jesse | Host | And that was really—after that, I was—I was—I was—I got bit. I got bit by the bug. I loved it. Loved being onstage. |
| 00:06:23 | Michael | Guest | How old were you? I mean, when are we talking about? Um, 26? 25? Well, I got cut on my 25 th birthday and this was definitely after that. So, it would have to be somewhere between 26, 27? |

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| 00:06:33 | Jesse | Host | I wanna play—I wanna play a song that came out when you were right around that age. And maybe you can tell me a little bit about what you remember about it and that time? |
| | | | <i>[Music fades in.]</i> |
| 00:06:51 | Michael | Guest | This is Kym Sims in “Too Blind to See It”. |
| 00:06:53 | Music | Music | Wooow. “Too Blind to See It” from the album <i>Too Blind to See It</i> by Kym Sims. |
| | | | <i>"Honey, let me tell you something No man in the world!"</i> |
| | | | <i>Don't wait for me 'Cause I won't be there Not this time Boy can't you see That I am leaving you behind</i> |
| | | | <i>[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.]</i> |
| 00:07:18 | Jesse | Host | So, tell me about that, Michael. |
| 00:07:21 | Michael | Guest | <i>[Overwhelmed with emotion, his voice tight.]</i> I'm sorry, give me a sec. I—I'm sorry. It's—um. That was my—I mean, uh—man. Excuse me. That, um—that song, man. That was the—that—the first time that, you know—like, my dream came true. You know what I mean? Like, when Kym hired me to be a dancer, I was homeless. You know what I mean? <i>[Through tears.]</i> I remember when I got the call. I was being kicked out where I was staying. They wanted me to leave. And I got the call that she wanted me to dance for her. And I went to where I was staying. I was packing up my stuff and I turned on the TV and I remember that was the same night that Michael Jackson—he released the video for “Remember the Time”. You know what I mean? And he had got all the dancers from New York, and I remember seeing like Leslie—Big Les—Leslie Segal and Josie and Stretch and all these young brothers and sisters that I looked up to and I aspired to be like. They was working with Michael Jackson, and I was like, “One day I'ma be there.” You know what I'm saying? |
| | | | <i>[Struggling to speak.]</i> I'm sorry, it's just—I haven't heard that song in a while. It just brought back a lot of memories, that's all. Pardon me. |
| 00:08:45 | Jesse | Host | Not at all. Was that the—was that the first— |
| 00:08:48 | Michael | Guest | That was my first dance job. That's the first time—that's the first time anybody ever hired me to do what I'm doing now, was Kym Sims. That was my first job doing anything in this business. You know what I mean? Anything. You know what I mean? So, I'm here today on the strength of that one song. I mean, shoutout to Kym Sims, man. |
| 00:09:11 | Jesse | Host | How'd you get the job? |
| 00:09:14 | Michael | Guest | <i>[Sniffs.]</i> You know what I mean, through a mutual friend. She had a dancer who was already—her choreographer at the time was a brother from Brooklyn named Chad Brown. He was already working with her. Right? And he had kind of recruited me to be like a—like a |

standby, if you will. You know, like a—like a—in case him or his other dancer, who he was taking out on the road to do her shows. And I met her through him, but I was standby. The backup. And I was just standby, you know, in case one of them couldn't make the show.

So, for like a couple of months, I was just learning her routines. You know, he was teaching me the routines and, you know, just getting me ready in case we had to make the call. I could just go and that was—you know, she gave me my shot. The call came. Jack couldn't make a show and they put me on—you know, I was up. Gave me my shot. And she ended up just keeping me, man.

00:10:11 Jesse Host

When that happened, did you feel like—did you feel like a professional?

00:10:16 Michael Guest

Yeah, you're damn right I did. I felt like a—like a grownup. I felt like, you know—I felt like, "Damn, it's really possible to get paid doing something you love." You know? That wasn't a job. That was—that was my first glimpse into my career. You know? Who'd have thunk it, being from Brooklyn, from Flatbush, with a career. You know what I mean? That doesn't happen often.

00:10:43 Jesse Host

You had done some kind of classic New York actor work earlier in your career—like being on *Law & Order* and stuff. But from what I have heard, and you can correct me if I'm wrong, you weren't really working when you went out for Omar. Is that true?

00:11:03 Michael Guest

Yes, sir. Um, after—you know, well, when I was making the transition from dancing to acting, I always—you know, again, I'll tell you I'm not the sharpest knife in the drawer. I didn't get very far in school. I was never—I was never meant—I don't—I don't believe that I was meant for classroom settings. I was always a in-the-field kind of guy. So, you know, while everybody was in the basement, we were shooting all these music videos in New York City and I was trying to get—you know, get on as a dancer. I would—when everybody was in the basement, you know, laughing, talking, whatever, playing Spades, I would just go and sit in the corner of the set and watch and listen. And that's how I got to learn how the set runs. You know?

00:11:49 Jesse Host

So, um—damn it, what was your question again?
[Chuckles.] My question was, you weren't—you weren't working much as an actor when—

00:11:52 Michael Guest

Right. Gotcha. Gotcha. Right. Yeah, so—you know, so after a while I said, "You know what, Mike? You know, you gotta—you know, birds of a feather flock together." So, I also started to make my transition with people who I surrounded myself with. And I started hanging around other people who were aspiring actors. And I started hearing things like, you know, "Are you gonna—did you get your SAG card yet?" You know, "Are you going to LA for pilot season?" And things. I was hearing conversations like that, as opposed to, you know—what who has auditioned for background dancers. I was listening to who got auditions for extra parts and things of that nature.

So, everything was always pilot season, pilot season, just pilot season! Right? And I was like, "Wait a minute. You mean pilot season means you pack up, you go halfway across this country, you know no one out there, and you go up against everyone else

around the country and that's—[chuckles] in hopes that you'll get—that sounds like a needle in a haystack!" And it frightened me, you know, that going LA. I said, "You know what? I'm gonna—I'm gonna wait." I said—at the time, there was a lot of—a lot of TV shows being shot in New York City. Shout out to Dick Wolf and all the *Law & Orders*. You had *NYPD Blue*, you had *New York Undercover*. So, I was like, "You know what, Mike? I got on my Frank Sinatra [censored]: if I can make it here, I can make it anywhere." I said, "If I build my resume with a little work around town and then, you know, LA will send for me. [Chuckles.] That's when I'll go to LA. They will send for me. I will be called and summoned to Hollywood when they—when I go there."

And I just kind of never went. And every time I would get close to taking my—I had—I had saved up all these frequent flyer miles, enough to get me one-way to LA. Every time I would go to book that ticket to Cali, I would book a job in New York acting. So, I was like, "Okay." That [censored] ran out '98, '99—you know, I had had—I had been on—I had worked with Nicholas Cage and that's my first time working with Marty Scorsese, on *Bringing Out the Dead*. I had a guest starring role on *Law & Order*, reenacting the Ray Cruz story. And then—and then, dude, I was a Black man that did not get killed off on *The Sopranos*. I thought—I thought I had arrived! You know what I mean? So, I packed my bag and sat by the door saying, "Oh, they're gonna be calling for me in [censored] a minute." Right?

And then, you know '99, I didn't work at all. It—just the phone went dead, nothing happened. And I got real scared and real bitter. And I can remember me and mother, we was—we went to the Bahamas. She took—she took all the family to the Bahamas, where she's from for that 2000, millennium, New Years, whatever. And we're sitting there, they drop the ball, we toast. And we were having drinks and whatnot. She said, "You know what, Mike? You ought to go come work in the daycare industry, man. You know. I'm paying your rent, might as well earn it!" I was like, gee, ma, thanks for the vote of confidence! But my moms had a—she—my mom, thank god for her, man. Shoutout to Baby P, man, Big Mamma. She—my mother opened up a daycare in the projects where we lived, and she was able to offer me a job! So, I took it and I prided myself as a—as her administrative assistant. You know, and she was old school. She still had her ledger book and whatnot, and she wrote everything down.

00:15:11 Michael Guest

I said, "Ma, listen. 2000, we gotta get these computers going on in here." So, I did all of that for her and—you know, with a lot of help and we implemented a free lunch program in the daycare. And I would say that took up all of 2000. It kept me—it kept me occupied. And for most of 2001, up until around October or so of 2001. I was sitting in my apartment and—like we do in the hood. You know. You put the TV on, but it's muted. You play music. And then you do some Spades, Dominos, you know, beer, weed, whatever going on. Chilling. Wintertime. And it was one of the days in my apartment—one of the nights in my crib and I was there with Ruck, who just passed. Man, shoutout to my brother Ruck with the Boot Camp. Man, he was there, me and him, my cousin. And the episode that I was on of *The Sopranos* came on TV.

So, I was like, “Okay, there’s something wrong with this picture. I’m here on the television and I’m here [*chuckling*] in the room.” I said, “Well, what’s happening here?” It was kind of like an out of body experience. And so, I went to my mom. I said, “Look. I’m a give this entertainment [*censored*] one more shot. Alright, Ma? If it don’t work, me and you, baby, we changing diapers.” Right? So, I said, “Listen.” She goes, “What you need?”

I said, “I need a loan. Give me ten grand.” She gave it to me. Reluctantly, but she gave it to me. And I put together this new—whole new reel, ‘cause it was my—the emancipation, you know what I mean? My emancipation. The comeback. You know what I mean? I’m back on the block. So, I got a whole new reel, whole new headshot, I bought a computer because in them days was before Apple, and you had to go to the computer show at Queens Community College and build your computer. That’s how we did it back in the day. And so, boom!

And I put together this real gaudy package and I put the hit list up—ten people who I was gonna send this package to, like the real headshot. I went—I went—my homeboy, his mom worked for Tiffany’s, so I went and got all these Tiffany pins and Tiffany boxes, and I sprayed the tissue with Tiffany cologne. Just going all out. And I mailed it to ten people, Kedar—[*stammering*] Kedar—I forget his last name right now, who—anyway, he’s a music guy. Jimmy Rosemond, aka Jimmy Henchmen. Kim Kapoor, Jaki Brown Carmon. These are some of the names that’s on my list. I sent them out for Christmas presents, right? I said, “You know what, Mike, it’s Christmas. Let it marinate. I’ll watch my crop. Right around January 10th, 14th, I should be getting some calls like, ‘Oh my god, we wanna see you.’”

Man, here we are in March. My moms is beating on my door, “Where’s my money?” [*Chuckles.*] Like, you know, same. Yeah, man. I kind of slipped into a darkness. Got a little depressed. This is, you know, post—I’d never really dealt with the 9/11 thing. I was having some stress issues with that and, you know, being in the projects. You know, feeling unfulfilled and I slipped into a slight depression. And so, you know—that’s where I was at when I got the call from Alexa Fogel. Thank god for her. She scoured the streets of New York to find me, ‘cause apparently she did not see my awesome package! I mean—but she found me.

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| 00:18:24 | Jesse | Host | Well, you sent it to Kedar Massenburg, the guy that ran Motown Records! |
| 00:18:28 | Michael | Guest | I was desperate, man! |
| 00:18:29 | Jesse | Host | You were trying to be the next—you were trying to be the next Erykah Badu. |
| 00:18:33 | Michael | Guest | Erykah Badu or DeAngelo, somebody! Some get me! But yeah, you know, Alexa Fogel found me. She found me in my despair, and she asked me to come meet this guy named Omar Devone Little. |
| 00:18:47 | Jesse | Host | It seems like it wasn’t—it wasn’t a particularly smooth journey, the next five, ten years of your career, though. |
| 00:18:57 | Michael | Guest | You know, I think I’ve been so fortunate and blessed. At the end of the day, I’ve got nothing to complain about. Nothing at all. In the short amount of time I’ve been in this business, you know— |

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| | | | <p>especially as an actor—the amount of success I’ve achieved, the level of people I’ve been blessed to work with and learn from has been truly like a dream come true. You know what I mean? People gotta remember, I only started acting—my first—my first big job was <i>The Wire</i>. That was just 2000 and, uh—2002 we started? You know, I started on <i>The Wire</i>, you know for—I’m talking about someone who never acted before, never had any dreams to act, never went to school to act. You know, and I got given this opportunity. You know? And, grace of God, man, I was able to turn it into something—you know, that I could really, you know, do good with.</p> |
| 00:19:56 | Jesse | Host | <p>We’ve got more of my interview with Michael K Williams, including more about his most iconic part—Omar Little. Stay with us. It’s <i>Bullseye</i>, from MaximumFun.org and NPR.</p> |
| 00:20:07 | Music | Transition | <p>Jazzy music with light vocalizations.</p> |
| 00:20:09 | Jesse | Promo | <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> |
| 00:20:40 | Music | Transition | <p><i>[Music fades out.]</i></p> |
| 00:20:45 | Jesse | Host | <p>Relaxed music with a steady beat.</p> <p>Welcome back to <i>Bullseye</i>. I’m Jesse Thorn. If you’re just joining us, we are replaying my 2016 interview with Michael K Williams. The late actor played Omar Little on <i>The Wire</i>, Chalky White on <i>Boardwalk Empire</i>, and had so many other roles on the big and small screens. Williams died on September 6th. He was 54. Let’s get back into our conversation.</p> <p>Did you have a point in your career where—especially working mostly as a dancer—you realized that you were gonna have to figure something out, because—you know, you started as a dancer professionally in your mid-20s, which is already—</p> |
| 00:21:27 | Michael | Guest | <p>Which is late. Which is on the late side.</p> |
| 00:21:28 | Jesse | Host | <p>Yeah! Which is already on the old side. Yeah.</p> <p><i>[Michael cackles.]</i></p> <p>You know, there’s not a lot of professional—there’s not a lot of professional—especially, you know, street dancers or urban dancers into their 30s. You know?</p> |
| 00:21:39 | Michael | Guest | <p>Man, listen, shoutout to the old heads, man. The old-school brooms still know the corners. You know what I mean?</p> <p><i>[Jesse chuckles.]</i></p> <p>Shoutout to my old school dancers, man. My boogiers. Know what I mean? But when I knew I had to make a shift was—you know, when I started coming onto the scene, you know, I was already—I had this scar on my face and I went from, “You know Mike Williams?” “Who?” “Come on, dude with the scar on his face!” “Oh! Yeah!” You know? Yeah, I will admit, I played that—I played that</p> |

card for like about a whole five minutes. And that got real old hat to me, and I said, “Well, if I’m getting tired of being referred to as the guy with the scar—” I said, “It’s gonna be a matter of time before they start referring to me as the guy with the scar.” I said, “I’m in the building, but if I wanna stay in the building I need to bring some substance into this.” And that’s when I got blessed to be introduced to the underground, Off-Broadway world of New York City through my brother, Ray Thomas—also from, again, from Philly.

He brought me to La MaMa where I met Ellen Stewart, God bless the dead. And it put me in this play and I—that’s where I learned how to create character and layers and, you know, what is the Method technique, what is the Meisner technique, and—you know, and then I got with my theatre company, which I’m still with today—Theater for a New Generation—under Mel Williams’s tutelage. When he started—when he put his hands on me, it was a wrap after that. I was going to these auditions just knocking them down. And, you know, it was that that gave me the substance and—you know, to let the scar go. It’s not about my scar. I’m not here because of that, you know, today.

00:23:30 Jesse Host

Was it scary to be as emotionally present and open as acting requires? Or was that something that came comfortably to you?

00:23:41 Michael Guest

Dude, you just played a frigging—a pop house song and I cried like a frigging baby just now.

[Jesse chuckles.]

I think—I think we know the answer to that! I’m a marshmallow here. I can’t—I can’t run that fast. *[Laughs.]* You know, but—you know, that’s where my strength lies. You know, it’s—you know, being sensitive and vulnerable. That’s who I am. You know? And I’m—ironically, the more I allow myself to be that and to allow people to see that is where my strength comes from.

00:24:17 Jesse Host

Well, let’s hear a clip of you playing Omar on *The Wire*. Omar was a stick-up artist who stuck up drug dealers.

[Michael confirms.]

And sort of universally, some combination of respected and feared in the neighborhood in which he lived—both because he had that code of only sticking up drug dealers and because he was the only person foolish/terrifying enough to go around sticking up drug dealers.

Here he is in season two of the show, testifying in court and he’s just been sworn in.

00:24:56 Sound Effect Transition

Music swells and fades.

00:24:57 Clip Clip

Speaker (*The Wire*): State your name for the record.

Omar: Omar Devone Little.

Speaker: Mr. Little, how old are you?

Omar: About 29, there about.

Speaker: And where do you live?

Omar: No place in particular, ma'am.

Speaker: You're homeless?

Omar: Eh, well, so to speak.

Speaker: And what is your occupation?

Omar: Occupation?

Speaker: What, exactly, do you do for a living, Mr. Little?

Omar: I rip and run.

[A murmur from the crowd.]

Speaker: You—?

Omar: I robs drug dealers.

[The crowd becomes more restless.]

Speaker: And exactly how long has this been your occupation, Mr. Little?

Omar: Oh, I don't know exactly. I'd venture to say maybe about eight or nine years.

Speaker: Mr. Little, how does a man rob drug dealers for eight or nine years and live to tell about it?

Omar: *[Sighs.]* Date and time, I suppose.
Music swells and fades.

00:25:53 Sound Effect Transition

00:25:54 Michael Guest

[They laugh.]

00:26:04 Jesse Host

Shoutout to David Simon, man. Nina Noble. Ed Burns.
And were you—I mean, this job was so important to you, 'cause it was—it was such a breakthrough. I mean, it was the difference between you working for your mom in the daycare center, changing diapers, and you being a real professional actor, making a living from being onscreen. That must have really upped the stakes, you know, compared to some of the acting vets who could have felt confident that this would just lead to their next thing.

00:26:32 Michael Guest

Yeah, you know, I came on *The Wire* extremely excited and very, very passionate to do the best job that I can possibly do. And I was just so in awe of the people they had already had on the cast, you know, starting first with, you know, Wendell Pierce and Sonja Sohn. You know, I had just seen—I was like obsessed with her performance opposite Saul Williams in this movie called *Slam*. You know, to see her and, you know, Wood Harris, I was like, "Oh my god!" You know what I mean? You know—ah, you know, like, "Oh!"

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| | | | So, I brought my A game. My A+ game, actually. And I dug as hard as I could to find Omar and I just—I just like—I never stopped like, you know, going deeper with him was always—“I can go deeper. What other nuances can I find? Or other layers can I—can I add on?” You know? It was always—I just—I attacked that like a dog that hadn’t been fed in so long. You know what I mean? And I had a lot of support. Lot of support. That was truly an ensemble. |
| 00:27:42 | Jesse | Host | I wanna play another great Omar scene from <i>The Wire</i> . So, Omar and his boyfriend, Brandon, are on—they’re part of this stick-up group and they’re about to go meet up with another dude called Bailey who’s in the crew, in this scene. This is from the fifth episode of the first season. And they’re packing up guns and there is a—there’s a little bit of profanity in this that we will bleep for the radio, but just, you know, be prepared, America. |
| 00:28:12 | Sound Effect | Transition | Music swells and fades. |
| 00:28:14 | Clip | Clip | Omar: Ain’t like him to be late. |
| | | | Brandon: <i>[Beat.]</i> Bailey’s a <i>[censored]</i> dope fiend. I’m telling you! Them <i>[censored]</i> people hate to be relied on. |
| | | | Omar: Hey, why you always gotta talk like that, man? |
| | | | Brandon: What? |
| | | | Omar: F this and F that. |
| | | | Brandon: If I give it up, I lose half of what I mean to say. |
| | | | Omar: Don’t nobody wanna hear them dirty words, man. Especially coming from such a beautiful mouth. |
| | | | <i>[They kiss as a dog barks in the background.]</i> |
| | | | Brandon: Wait for Bailey? |
| 00:29:08 | Sound Effect | Transition | Omar: Early bird catch the worm, dog. Music swells and fades. |
| 00:29:10 | Jesse | Host | <i>[Michael laughs.]</i> |
| 00:29:16 | Michael | Guest | I heard that that kiss wasn’t in the script. No. No, it was not. <i>[Chuckles.]</i> Yeah, there was a lot of newness on the set of <i>The Wire</i> . You know, a lot of—you know, first timers like myself and, you know, it was so many characters and personalities and storylines to manage, you know, on a new show with minimal—you know, we had minimal dollars. They didn’t roll out the red carpet for us, over there in Baltimore on <i>The Wire</i> . So, we had to make do and there was no room for error. You know, but—so, we kept—the directors that would come in would keep things kind of like, you know, just—you know, trying to just get through it, man, ‘cause it was so much to manage. |
| | | | And I was like—you know, I forget which episode. I had to say, “Wait a minute.” I said, “Okay, now I signed up to play a gay character, right? I know I don’t have to act feminine.” I said, “But, |

you know, I think there should be some more happening here! Should be like—it's—you know, we're doing a real show here, right? So, we gotta keep it popping!" So, I went to my co-star at the time. Michael—his name is also Michael—who played Brandon. And I was like, "Yo, Mike. We—" I said, "I think we gotta step it up, man." I said, "All they got us doing is holding hands and rubbing lips and playing in your hair." I said—I said, "We gotta like—you know, bring it!" I said, "You know what I mean?"

He says, "What do you suggest we do?"

I said, "Yo, I think we should lock lips in this scene right here!"

He said, "What? It's not in this—"

I said, "I know." I said, "I think we—you know, it'll really be—it feels right in this scene, right now!"

He says, "Alright. When're you gonna do it?" I start to tell him, he said, "Don't tell me! 'Cause I might freeze up when it's coming. Just—just—just pull in for it. Just go for it."

00:30:53 Michael Guest

I said, "Alright. I got you." Clark Johnson was directing this particular episode. So, he called us in for rehearsal. You know, he was like, "Yeah, run the lines." And he was still doing some—giving some direction, doing something with the lighting or the camera, whatever. And he heard the kiss, turned around, looked at us. He said, "Woah, woah, woah, stop the work." He said, "Run that scene again." Did it. *[Makes a kiss noise.]* Kissed again. He's like—he looked at me. He looked at—read the script. He said, "Y'all put that in there?"

I said, "Yeah, we put that in there."

Nodded his head. He said, "Brave." *[Chuckles.]* And I knew from that point on they started calling—they started calling Michael K Williams to the set! No more *[laughs]*—yeah, I mean, it kind of stepped things—you know, I set the tone kind of—you know, set it up.

00:31:35 Jesse Host

You know, there are—there are few characters that people are more fascinated by or identify with more on *The Wire* and there are not a lot of shows—there are still not a lot of shows—that treat the kind of situations and people that are on *The Wire* with the respect that *The Wire* did. And I think it really was—you know, it was really resonant for a lot of people for that reason.

So, your character was the baddest of the bad on this show and also really sweet and, you know, touching character and was also gay. And... you know, you were a—you know, you were dancing to house music in 1988. I imagine that you were reasonably comfortable with the idea of there being lots of different kinds of gay guys, but when you were just walking home in Brooklyn or something and somebody came up to you and said, "Oh, man! Are you Omar?" it must have been a trip to connect with people who you were meeting that maybe didn't have that experience or didn't—weren't comfortable having that experience, for them to feel

00:32:51 Michael Guest like they got to know Omar and that you get to have that exchange with them and almost be an ambassador. You know what I mean? Wow, ambassador, that's just—that's—ambassador, that's a strong word. But, you know, I definitely—you know, I've been approached a few times with warm words about breaking a certain stereotype of Black gay men, in Hollywood—or just gay men period, in Hollywood—always being one way, which was feminine. You know. You know, or out or—you know, so obvious. Whereas that's not the entire gay community. Yeah, I got approached a few times and like kind of nod at like, you know, good looking, you know, good portrayal of the character.

00:34:05 Jesse Host You know, but I would say my proudest moment of having anything to do with anything in that perspective was when I heard from Jay-Z's camp that allegedly my portrayal of Omar had given him—given him some sort of courage, if you will, to come out publicly and speak for marriage equality. You know what I mean? And I thought that, you know, he didn't have to—he didn't have to put that out there. So, I heard through his camp that—you know—that was part of his decision—included in part of his decision making to come publicly with that. And that humbled me a lot.

00:34:05 Jesse Host Some of the characters who are criminals and killers on *The Wire* are cold and sit comfortably under the heading of "bad". A lot of them aren't—including Omar, who's a pretty murderous dude but is immensely likable for many—for many reasons. And I wonder if you knew, coming up in Brooklyn, people who were legit scary? People who got involved in bad stuff but who you also—but who you also maybe liked.

00:34:48 Michael Guest No, no. I loved. I have a—you know, Vanderveer—if anybody's from New York City of a certain that ever heard of a little area in east Flatbush called Vanderveer, there's a few bad boys in that area, you know, [*drawing out the vowels*] bad boy. You know? And yeah, I can say were my big brothers and comrades, which is who I pulled on to bring reality to Omar—that energy, when Omar had to go menacing. I pulled from my relationships with these men, growing up. But the hardest thing for me to do was to—how do I digest that and make it real for me? Because, I had a certain—[*stammering*] those same men who I speak of now, from my neighborhood, they also knew—how I knew who they were, they knew how I was. And everybody who grew up with me knew that Mike was so not that dude. You know? And so, I had to find a way to make that believable coming from my vehicle.

And, for me, it was not the alpha male way to go. That was not—that wasn't gonna work for my vehicle. It was—it was his vulnerability. Like, you know, it's the dude that gets quiet and kind of like just gets real like—goes in. That's the one you need to be scared of, 'cause they'll put that gun in your mouth while you're running it. You know what I mean? And pull the trigger and be done. You know? And never say a word. So, that type of hostility and danger, it comes from a place of vulnerability, I believe. You know, it's—when you—when you hurt someone to the point, that's sensitive—you know, and they can be dangerous, you got a very—potentially very bad problem.

And so, that's where I—that's where I played Omar from, because I could identify with his sensitiveness and his vulnerability. You know. That's what I have in common with him and I just took it a step further 'cause I know what it is to be angry enough to wanna do malice to someone, but I don't act on it. Whereas in Omar, I got to go all the way there and you mix it with what I've seen, how dudes who really get it in—how they go—and you mix the two together, it became believable for me and I believe that's what resonated with the audience: the fact that I didn't try to be—I didn't want Omar to be a chest beater. You know? He was the guy that's like, "Alright. I see you. That's how you roll and that's how you feel. Alright. Okay." Man of few words. Actions. You know?

00:37:24 Jesse Host

In a way, he's also a dude who—you know, his place in that world is so clear and he and everyone else knows his rules. And it seems to me like a lot of people that I meet that got out of tough situations, a lot of times it was about that world kind of getting this understanding. You know, everyone around them getting this understanding, "Oh, he's this type of guy." You know?

00:37:57 Michael Guest

Yeah, I believe you're referring to one of his most famous quotes, which is, "A man's gotta have a code." You know. Which is I think—I think what you're speaking to right now is primarily what the—what warranted the attention of the president and drew President Obama into him was that character trait which you speak of right there. Because in reality, that's a rare—that's a rare find, to meet people who are transparent and who live—who have their set of rules that you may or may not agree with, but you can set your clock by it.

You know there are certain things that a person won't do because of how they roll, and a person will do because of how they roll. You may not like it on either way, but you can set your watch by it. And that's what the code is about. That's what "man with a code—man must have a code" is about. And I think that's what warranted the attention of President Obama. Not that he was agreeing with Omar's lifestyle, but he respected the fact that he was a man that you can set your watch by, so to speak.

00:39:06 Jesse Host

[Chuckles.] It would be pretty funny if President Obama was agreeing with his lifestyle. He's like, "Well, you know, I mean, I've really enjoyed being president these past eight years."

[Michael chuckles.]

I think I'm gonna become a stick-up kid.

00:39:17 Michael Guest

[They laugh.]

Nah, nah, nah. I think he—I think he's past his days of having to do that. But you know, I did applaud him for having—you know, the *[censored]*, if I will, as President of the United States to publicly come out, at that time, and say—you know, or as a candidate. I think he was candidate when he first spoke publicly about *The Wire*. I thought that took a lot of courage for that time. You know, with what he represented at the time. Definitely for me, it made me think that I could trust him. Anyone on that level of a platform who doesn't need—who didn't need *The Wire's* endorsement or anything like that, 'cause he had—he had the Black community in spades.

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| | | | So, he didn't need to mention anything like that, but the fact that he did—it—for me, it let me know that he got his eye on what is going on in the community and really cared about it. 'Cause, you know, no one was really talking on that platform, on that level, about <i>The Wire</i> like that—you know, publicly saying they liked my character for the reasons why he said it. You know? I thought that was very brave of him and it made me have a lot of respect and admiration for him and wanted to get behind him. |
| 00:40:27 | Jesse | Host | We'll wrap up with Michael K Williams in a minute. Stay with us. It's <i>Bullseye</i> , from MaximumFun.org and NPR. |
| 00:40:34 | Music | Transition | Laid back, relaxed music. |
| 00:40:37 | Jesse | Promo | This message comes from NPR sponsor Odoo. |

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| 00:41:09 | Promo | Clip | <i>[Music fades out.]</i> <i>[Crash of thunder and sound of rain.]</i> |
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Speaker 1: We have wasted this world. Our magic put a storm in the sky that has rendered the surface of our planet uninhabitable. But... beneath the surface? Well, that's another story entirely.

[Magical sound.]

Music: Synth-heavy, mid-tempo music with driving beat.

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| 00:41:55 | Music | Transition | Speaker 1: In a city built leagues below the apocalypse, survivors of the storm forge paths through a strange new world. Some seek salvation for their homeland above. Others seek to chart the vast, undersea expanse outside the city's walls. And others still seek—what else?—fortune and glory. Dive into the Ether Sea, the latest campaign from <i>The Adventure Zone</i> . Every-other Thursday on MaximumFun.org or wherever you listen to podcasts. |
| 00:41:59 | Jesse | Host | Thumpy music with light vocalizations. |

Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. We're remembering the life and work of the actor Michael K Williams, who died earlier this month at 54. I interviewed him in 2016. Let's hear the rest of our conversation.

I wanna play a clip from *Hap and Leonard*, which is my guest—Michael K Williams's—new show on Sundance. It's about these two best friends who are like not exactly detectives but just kind of stuff happens around them. Michael plays a guy named Leonard. His best friend is named Hap. He's played by James Purefoy. And they kind of get involved in this scheme run by Hap's ex-wife, who's played by Christina Hendricks, and she comes and sort of seduces Hap and convinces them that they should go try and find this underwater car that maybe has \$1,000,000 in it that's by an old bridge. And Leonard doesn't trust her and he's just a bit iffy about the whole thing.

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| | | | And in this scene, he's agreed to do it and they're loading up their car—or their truck, actually—to head out there. So, let's take a listen. |
| 00:43:10 | Sound Effect | Transition | Music swells and fades. |
| 00:43:11 | Clip | Clip | Leonard (<i>Hap and Leonard</i>): This is your cross to bear. We don't know this Howard from nothing. |
| | | | Hap: Nah, he's a hippie idealist. He's gonna take that money from a big bank—capitalist bank—and give it to a good cause. |
| | | | Leonard: What cause? |
| | | | Hap: Save the seals, save the whales, I don't know. I didn't ask. |
| | | | Leonard: I get any money out of this? The only cause I'ma give it to is me. Seals ain't got no bills to pay. How close is this Howard and Trudy anyway? |
| | | | Hap: I don't know. And I don't care. I told you; just getting laid, that's all. |
| | | | Leonard: [<i>Scoffs.</i>] You keep telling yourself that. I don't know how I let you talk me into these things. |
| | | | Hap: Rumor has it, it's something to do with my perfect [<i>censored</i>] and my perky [<i>censored</i>]. |
| | | | Leonard: I only said that to annoy Trudy. |
| 00:44:08 | Sound Effect | Transition | Hap: You being alive annoys Trudy. Music swells and fades. |
| 00:44:09 | Michael | Guest | [<i>They laugh.</i>] |
| 00:44:13 | Jesse | Host | <i>Hap and Leonard.</i> The two of you are so wonderful together. And, you know, it's sort of the premise of the whole show. In a way, it's like—in a way, it's like a sitcom, not in that it's full of jokes—although it does have some jokes in it—in that it is just super driven by this character relationship. |
| 00:44:30 | Michael | Guest | Yeah. Yeah. You know, that was very—it feels so real because it is. You know, as you may or may not know, James Purefoy and I have known each other since, what? 2008? We were together working on a project in Cape Town, South Africa, back then, for like seven, eight months. So, you know, we developed a friendship, man, and kept in contact over the years. And so—and we talk like that. Me, him, and his wife, man we'll get together. It's just like anything goes. You know what I mean? You know. We just—it's like family. So, there was no—there was not a better fit for the role of Hap with me as Leonard than James. I can't think of another person. |
| 00:45:14 | Jesse | Host | We're just about out of time, Michael, but I wanna ask you about one slightly frivolous thing. So, you and a couple of your co-stars from <i>The Wire</i> are in one of my favorite music videos for one of my favorite songs ever, which is “What We Do” by Freeway. |

00:45:35 Michael Guest You know, dude, you are—you are just—you've got—you've got—you're shocking me, today! You just keep coming with these like little—who are you, dude!? You're all over the place! I've got a lot of respect for you, man. That's dope.

00:45:45 Jesse Host Well, Michael, you're the—you're the one who just like—who was just like, "Yeah, you know, when I decided to get serious about show business, I was just in my apartment drinking beer, maybe smoking a little weed, and playing Dominoes with Sean Price. Sean Price!

00:46:00 Michael Guest

00:46:03 Jesse Host *[They laugh.]*
Just dropped that in there!

00:46:05 Michael Guest I had to, man. That was my—you know I used to drive him to his gigs? Back in the day? When he had gigs around New York, I would take him to his shows, man. That dude was special. But yeah. "Even though what we do is wrong." You know. And that's a little—not to end on a solemn note, but that day—if you notice, in that video, I'm only in the last couple of shots towards like a staircase and towards the end, and that's because I went straight from the burial ground. I buried my aunt, my mother's sister who was like a grandmother to me. I buried her that day and that's why you don't see me in the earlier part of that video. So, I left—I went straight from the graveyard. I changed my clothes, and I ran, 'cause I just wanted to just—you know, throw that energy—you know, kind of switch up the scene for that day.

And I went to the set, man. I took my two sons with me, man, and we went out there and them dudes—my two boys, I was so proud of them. They shook everybody down. Jay-Z! Everybody! Freeway! Beanie! I was like, "Get 'em! Get 'em, thugs!" My dudes came out of the trailer with like \$50 apiece. You know what I'm saying? It's like—

00:47:12 Jesse Host *[They cackle.]*
When that song came out, I was a fan of *The Wire* and just seeing that video, you know, like on *106 & Park* or something like that, it was like, "Oh man! Other people watch *The Wire*?"

00:47:36 Michael Guest *[They laugh.]*
Like, "This whole time, I thought it was just me! But it turns out it's me and maybe Jay-Z and Freeway and Beanie Sigel!"
[Laughs.] Yeah, I'll never forget the first time I realized that someone else was—people were actually watching this show. I was going into the city to meet a friend of mine and I had the radio on to *HOT 97* and I'm—you know, it was Friday mix, new hip-hop, and what's one—the dudes from the G-Unit camp? I think it was Yayo. Tony Yayo. He was spitting live on the radio and the dude said, "I jump out the car with the Ruger on fire," something, something, something, "Like Omar on *The Wire*."

00:48:22 Jesse Host When I tell you I heard that *[censored]*, I almost crashed on the Brooklyn Bridge! I was like, *[shouting]* "Yo! Yooo!" *[Laughs.]* Man, yeah. I was like, "Okay, I guess people are watching. Yeah."
Well, Michael K Williams, I sure appreciate you coming on *Bullseye*. You're welcome here anytime. It was just a pleasure.

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| 00:48:29 | Michael | Guest | Thank you, man. Enjoy your weekend. |
| 00:48:31 | Jesse | Host | I'm so—thank you so much for doing this. It was just a—just a dream to have you on the show. |
| 00:48:35 | Michael | Guest | Caught me off guard with that Kym Sims. I'm gonna pay forever. |
| | | | <i>[Jesse laughs.]</i> |
| | | | I'm gonna lose—I'm gonna lose some cool points on the Instagram for that one, I know it! |
| | | | <i>[They cackle.]</i> |
| 00:48:44 | Jesse | Host | Alright, man. Cheers. |
| 00:48:45 | Michael | Guest | Thanks, man. |
| 00:48:47 | Jesse | Host | Peace. |
| | | | Michael K Williams, from 2016. Getting to talk to him and our conversation was a highlight of my career, and I am grateful for his life and work. |
| | | | If you or someone you know is suffering from addiction, you can get referrals to local treatment centers and other support services by calling Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services' national help line. Their number is 1-800-662-HELP. That's 1-800-662-HELP. 1-800-662-4357. It's free and available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. If you're experiencing a crisis of any kind and just need to talk to somebody, you can text the number 741741 to reach a crisis counselor. Again, that's 741741, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, completely free. There is help available and it's never too late. |
| 00:49:45 | Music | Transition | Bright, brassy music with a synth flair. |
| 00:49:47 | Jesse | Host | That's the end of another episode of <i>Bullseye</i> . <i>Bullseye</i> , created from the homes of me and the staff of Maximum Fun, in and around greater Los Angeles, California. |
| | | | The show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producer is Jesus Ambrosio. Production fellows at Maximum Fun are Richard Robey and Valerie Moffat. Our interstitial music is by Dan Wally, also known as DJW. Our theme song is by The Go! Team. Thanks to them and to their label, Memphis Industries, for sharing it with us. |
| | | | You can keep up with our show on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. We post our interviews there. And I think that's about it. Just remember: all great radio hosts have a signature signoff. |
| 00:50:28 | Promo | Promo | Speaker: <i>Bullseye with Jesse Thorn</i> is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR. |
| | | | <i>[Music fades out.]</i> |