

00:00:00	Music	Transition	Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.
00:00:01	Promo	Promo	<b>Speaker:</b> <i>Bullseye with Jesse Thorn</i> is a production of <a href="http://MaximumFun.org">MaximumFun.org</a> and is distributed by NPR.
00:00:14	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.
00:00:21	Jesse Thorn	Host	It’s <i>Bullseye</i> . I’m Jesse Thorn. Courtney B. Vance started acting in college. He went to Yale drama school, where he met his future wife, Angela Bassett. And as far as first big gigs go, you could do a lot worse than the one Courtney had. He starred in the original production of August Wilson’s <i>Fences</i> , first at the Yale Repertory Theatre in 1985, then on tour, then later on Broadway in 1987. He played Cory in the play, opposite James Earl Jones as Troy. The role earned Vance a Tony nomination. He’s gone on to work on the big and small screen. He played assistant DA, Ron Carver, on <i>Law &amp; Order: Criminal Intent</i> . He had great parts in military films, like <i>The Hunt for Red October</i> and <i>Hamburger Hill</i> . But it wasn’t until the 2010s that his career trajectory really changed.
00:01:33	Sound Effect	Transition	He was cast as Johnny Cochrane in the TV miniseries <i>The People v. O.J. Simpson</i> . It’s a part that, in the hands of other actors, could have easily become cartoonish, like Jackie Chiles on <i>Seinfeld</i> . Vance’s Cochrane though was nuanced, complex, and very, very good at public speaking. Music swells and fades.
00:01:34	Clip	Clip	<b>Music:</b> Low, tense music.
00:02:08	Sound Effect	Transition	<b>Johnny Cochrane (<i>The People v. O.J. Simpson</i>):</b> Mr. Darden’s remarks this afternoon are perhaps the most incredible remarks I ever heard in a court of law in my 32 years of practice. His remarks are deeply demeaning to African Americans. And so, first and foremost, your honor, I would like to apologize to African Americans across this country. It is preposterous to say that African Americans collectively are so emotionally unstable that they cannot hear offensive words without losing their moral sense of right and wrong. Music swells and fades.
00:02:09	Jesse	Host	To the surprise of pretty much no one, Vance won an Emmy for his performance. And the part opened the door to even more. <i>Lovecraft Country</i> , <i>Genius: Aretha</i> , and his newest project, <i>61<sup>st</sup> Street</i> . The show—which Vance also executive produced—follows a Black teenager named Moses. He’s a promising high school track star who becomes the prime suspect in a case that left a police officer dead.
			Vance plays the part of Franklin Roberts, in the show: a public defender who takes up Moses’s case. In this clip from early on in the series, Moses is in police custody. Franklin has come to talk to him. Moses just signed a memorandum of cooperation with the police about the events that took place on the day of the incident. Franklin tells him that was a mistake.

00:02:53	Sound Effect	Transition	Music swells and fades.
00:02:54	Clip	Clip	<p><b>Franklin (61<sup>st</sup> Street):</b> What was the very last thing I said?</p> <p><b>Moses:</b> You talked about what happened in the car.</p> <p><b>Franklin:</b> Moses, Moses—</p> <p><b>Moses:</b> It sounded like you was trying to help me!</p> <p><b>Franklin:</b> Help you?!</p> <p><b>Moses:</b> Yeah, that's what it felt like!</p> <p><b>Franklin:</b> And now? How does it feel now?</p> <p><b>Moses:</b> <i>[Beat.]</i> I don't feel guilty. I don't feel like I'm a murderer or nothing.</p> <p><b>Franklin:</b> That piece of paper you signed, in the eyes of the law it says you're both.</p> <p><b>Moses:</b> <i>[Beat.]</i> The law ain't right, Mr. Franklin. The law ain't right.</p>
00:03:30	Sound Effect	Transition	Music swells and fades.
00:03:31	Jesse	Host	Courtney B. Vance, welcome to <i>Bullseye</i> . I'm happy to have you on the show.
00:03:34	Courtney B. Vance	Guest	Good to be here.
00:03:35	Jesse	Host	This is from a man who only recently made a name playing Johnny Cochrane. It's a very different defense attorney situation.
00:03:43	Courtney	Guest	<i>[Chuckles.]</i> Just a little bit. There'll be no flashy clothes and ties in this. They'll be hats, though, Jesse.
00:03:49	Jesse	Host	Oh, excellent. Well, I'm happy to hear that. You walked in here with a serious hat on from Optimo, in Chicago.
00:03:54	Courtney	Guest	Optimo, that's right.
00:03:55	Jesse	Host	I have to say, I did spot it on your head, and I checked in about it.
			<i>[Courtney chuckles.]</i>
			I'm always glad when somebody's wearing a real hat in here.
			But <i>[chuckles]</i> there's a fair amount of fumbling and schlubbiness in your role that would not—that would not befit Johnny Cochrane. Tell me about how you—how you got the physical feeling of this character?
00:04:22	Courtney	Guest	Well, I think the physical feeling of him comes from the fact that he's not a defense attorney. He's—by trade, he's a public defender. So, the project begins with him at the tail end of—he's about to retire. Two weeks before he retires. And he's—you know—in that space where you're questioning, you know, whether or not the past 30 years have done anything. And I ask my wife, I say, "Have I made a dent? Have I done anything?"

And she just gently, you know, just says, “You know, the system is gonna go on with or without us. Just—let’s go, honey. It’s time to go to the next phase. And you know, it’s—my mother passed away four years ago. ALS. Taught us, as the slow decline—at the end there, all she could do was move her left thumb and blink her eyes—taught us about the dignity of life and the cycle of life. And what are you here for? What are you going to do? And that’s why every day is important, and that’s why this particular character—for me, he had a choice to make. Because he was going about his life, as was Moses, as was my wife, Martha. You know, Aunjanue’s character, and Andrene Ward was going about her character’s life—she was Moses’s mother. And everyone’s just—Moses was gearing up. The next day, he was gonna be in college. Going to college and gonna be on the Olympic team and serving, you know, our community well out there in the world.

He was gonna get out. And then life happened. And that’s very—that’s not Black. That’s not White. That’s not Hispanic, Latina. That’s not—that’s just life. And what do you do when life throws you a curveball? How do you adjust? What do you—do you give up? Do you throw it in? And some people—you know, people deal with tragedies and grief differently. And everybody can’t do it, as evidenced by the suicide rates. They’re sky high these days. There’s mental health books and—but it’s really—it was—I was so fascinated by this character and that moment of the Sophie’s Choice moment, that Franklin Roberts moment it’ll be known as now. Where you—what are you going to do? And what are the repercussions of that choice that when I say, “They’re not getting him. They’re not getting Moses. They cannot have him.”

And to my wife, who I promised that I was going to allow her to segue into politics and me segue back into the home to take care of our 16-year-old, autistic son who needs me. So, now he’s juggling two things: taking care of—taking a load off his wife. His wife’s going into politics. And my health concerns are happening. You know, so much is going on and swirling. And this story is just about a man who’s trying to do the right thing.

00:07:48 Jesse Host  
00:07:51 Courtney Guest

Have you ever thought about retiring?  
No. No. Um, I look at my—the person that I looked up to and still do to this day, James Earl Jones, and he’s still working. He’s 90. You know? I think Dave Winfield said it best when he said that he knew it was time to hang it up when he couldn’t see the ball hit the bat, anymore. And he couldn’t follow the ball to the bat. And he said when he knew that when he couldn’t do that anymore, it was time to stop ‘cause he would get hurt. So, I think when the mind goes, you gotta let it go. ‘Cause you have to—still have to have a way to figure out how to get the words in there and come out in a cohesive manner. So.

And it’s not easy. You know. It’s—you know, I’ve learned that I know my lines based on what I’m doing. So, I focus on the actions. And then once I know the actions, I—so, it means I have to go into the rehearsals and to the actual shooting of it knowing the lines just enough so that I can add in the physical. And so, it’s a little scary, because I know that I don’t really know it. I can memorize it all I want to, but when you get in there, they start throwing things at you.

And you, in your mind, you were walking around. But they say, “No, we’re gonna sit down on this.” Oh. In my mind, it was a rectangular room, but no. You see the set; it’s actually a circle. It’s actually an oval room.

So—and that’s happened to me. So, I’ve learned I can’t make decisions. I can’t know them so much that I’m not able to make adjustments.

00:09:35 Jesse Host

I mean, the reason I asked you about retirement is not because I think you should retire. I say keep going. That’s my request to you. It’s because like one of the things that this piece is about is looking at a life lived in a system over which you do not have agency. Right? Like, you have influence perhaps, but not agency. And trying to decide what it means [*chuckles*—like, what it means to press on something and hope that something will change when it is, you know—when it is both hopeful and hopeless. Right? And like, when you’re an actor, you don’t have a ton of agency, either. Like, actor—for an artist—is a low agency gig compared to a painter. You know what I mean?

[*Courtney affirms.*]

Like, you’re always—you know, you were on *Law & Order: Criminal Intent* for a long time and like you know, your job is to show up there and they hand you a page of different objections and [*laughs*—

00:10:36 Courtney Guest  
00:10:37 Jesse Host

Bring me the evidence!

You know. You’re serving that narrative. You know what I mean? And you’re also at the age where you could—and the level of success, you and your wife as well, your wife being a movie star—are at the level of success where you could retire. So, I imagine that is like a kind of a relatable thing to think about like, well gosh, I guess I have to think about what actually matters now.

00:10:58 Courtney Guest

You know, but we’ve always done that. And—which is why we do the roles that we do, and we turn down the things that we turn down.

00:11:08 Jesse Host

That is you and your wife?

00:11:09 Courtney Guest

Yes. You know. It’s like I was on Broadway, you know, for seven years of my career in New York, just constantly onstage. You know. Project after project after project. For my generation, I was onstage more than anybody that I know. It was a blessing, but I burned out. That’s why I came out to LA. And then I didn’t go back until—that was ’92 or 3. I did *Six Degrees* with Stockard Channing for about a year and a half, at the Vivian Beaumont. And then I completely burned out. I lost my dad, and so I was—I had to—I gotta go away. I came to LA. So, didn’t go back until *Lucky Guy*, 2012/13.

And then, you know, just had to reacclimate myself to the world, ‘cause the world onstage is a completely different world than it is. And you have the play to carry you through. So, that’s a wonderful thing, but it is a journey every day. It’s not something where you can say cut and then we do the scene and we’re done with it. No. We finished rehearsing that scene, or you finished that scene that night and you’re performing it and you gotta start again—the whole process again of coming to the theatre, getting yourself ready. You know, the whole ritual of theatre is a thing that, as an actor, you

have to do that to know the fear—the absolute fear that you have, as a performer—that’s why I say actors, performers, you know, are the most—some of the most courageous people, to actually get up there and not know really what’s happening yet.

Because you really don’t know until after you open, when the pressure is all off. And then the new rhythm is just how do I do this, give people the same show, same intensity, same value, same wonderful show night after night after night. That’s a different rhythm than the fear of getting up there when you, at the early stage, don’t know what you’re doing. Yet.

00:13:25 Jesse Host We have so much more to get into. Stay with us. It’s *Bullseye*, from [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and NPR.

00:13:32 Music Transition Chiming synth with a steady beat.

00:13:37 Jesse Host Welcome back to *Bullseye*, I’m Jesse Thorn. My guest is Courtney B. Vance. He starred in the original production of August Wilson’s iconic play, *Fences*. He also won an Emmy for his role as Johnny Cochrane in *The People v. O.J. Simpson*. He’s now starring alongside Aunjanue Ellis in the new legal drama, *61<sup>st</sup> Street*. That’s on AMC now. Let’s get back into our conversation.

So, you did *Fences* initially as a student as it was being developed at the—when you were at the Yale school of drama.

00:14:06 Courtney Guest Second year. Second year. No, actually, it was—I think it was—I was a first-year student, but it didn’t come—I read it in first year, but it didn’t come up for me until the second year. And I did the play. And then it came up to go to Chicago to re-rehearse it to go to Chicago, at the Goodman Theatre, in my third year.

00:14:25 Jesse Host When did James Earl Jones enter the picture? Was he there from the beginning?

00:14:27 Courtney Guest From the very beginning.

00:14:28 Jesse Host Was August Wilson around?

00:14:30 Courtney Guest From the very beginning. August and Lloyd were simpatico. They were so tied to each other. And so much so, that when there was a—we almost didn’t open the play, because there was a conflict between the star and the producer, ‘cause they saw the play ending twice. And so, there was a big—unbeknownst to me, until the last minute. The star, James Earl, and the producer—a young producer—and August Wilson and Lloyd Richards were at odds. And two days before we were supposed to open on Broadway, Lloyd Richards said, “I’m stepping down as director, because I won’t go against my playwright.”

And we all knew that it was about the ending. The August Wilson play ended with Gabe trying to get James Earl Jones’s character into Heaven by blowing his horn. He’s been saying that the whole play. And everyone knew there was no mouthpiece on the horn. So, there was no sound gonna come out of it. But he’s been saying he’s gonna do that, so they know he has to blow the horn. And everyone knew—in the play and in the audience—there was no sound coming out of it. But he has to do it, ‘cause he’s been saying it. James Earl and Carol Sean Hayes, the producer, said that, “No. The play ends with Cory singing the song, mourning his father. That’s the end of the play.” And there was a battle of epic proportions.

In San Francisco, we did the play—in the matinee, we did it one way, ending with me singing the song and the play was over. The evening performance of the same day, we did the play with—I did that and then Gabe came in and said, “You ready, Troy? I’m here.” And he blew the horn. So, we were going back and forth and back and forth, and they couldn’t decide. And it was ugly, unbeknownst to me. But spilled over and we all—then when Lloyd suddenly said, “I’m out,” we all stood up and said please, can’t we—basically, can’t we just get along? Can we—? We’ve been doing this for two years. The play is a huge—gonna be a huge hit. It’s gonna be a smash! And we all left the theatre and that was it. We knew that it was over.

And the next day, we were called in and evidently they’ve reached a compromise. And August—or maybe it was Lloyd. Lloyd announced that August has asked him to stage a compromise, and the play went on to theatre history.

00:16:54	Jesse	Host	I actually have a clip from the Broadway production of <i>Fences</i> . So, you’d been doing it for a few years, probably, by the time this was recorded.
00:17:00	Courtney	Guest	Oh my goodness. This was I think done when we did the Tonys.
00:17:06	Jesse	Host	Yeah, this is 1987. And—
00:17:09	Courtney	Guest	“How come you ain’t never liked me?”
00:17:11	Jesse	Host	Exactly. So, James Earl Jones plays your dad, in the show. You’re his son. And this is—I mean, there’s not much more set up needed than, “How come you never liked me?”
00:17:22	Sound Effect	Transition	Music swells and fades.
00:17:23	Clip	Clip	<b>Cory (<i>Fences</i>):</b> Can I ask you a question?

**Troy:** What the hell you wanna ask me? Mr. Stawicki is the one you got the questions for.

**Cory:** How come you ain’t never liked me?

**Troy:** Liked you? [*Beat.*] Who in the hell ever said I’ve got to like you? What law is there to say I’ve to go like you? Do you want to stand up in my face and ask me some damn fool [*censored*] question like that? Talking about liking somebody! [*A crash.*] Come here, boy, when I’m talking to you! Straighten up, god[*censored*]. I asked you a question. What law is there to say I got to like you?

**Cory:** [*Defeated.*] None.

**Troy:** Alright, then.  
Music swells and fades.

00:18:08	Sound Effect	Transition	Music swells and fades.
00:18:09	Jesse	Host	I saw your head snap back while you were listening to that.
00:18:12	Courtney	Guest	Mm. Yeah, emotionally, I’m just—I’m right back there. You know? ‘Cause it really is about—‘cause I’ve seen it played before, and you know, the issue is that we had three different renditions rehearsed completely, and then performed three different times before it came to Broadway. So, nobody will ever be able to get where we got to, because of the way Lloyd Richard set up August Wilson’s play to go around the country to different regional theatres with different productions, three or four or five times before they came in. And so, the idea—a lot of times, I’ve seen it done where there’s—the young

man playing Cory is just so, you know—it's a battle of wills. But it's not a battle. It's—he's just—as Rose comes out and says to Troy after Troy's character sends Cory, my character, on to talk to Mr. Stawicki to get my job back, she says, "He just wants you to say good job, son. That's all. The boy just wants you to give him some praise."

And you know, that's the beauty of great writing is that you see James Earl's character's point of view and you see the boy's point of view. You see Rose's point of view. And they're all right. And where the play just touches people so deeply is that eventually, all of that's gonna come to a head and you know it. You already know it can't keep going like it's going. And eventually, he's going to be a man, 17, and he's not going to take it the way he took it when he was the young man saying, "Dad, how come you never liked me?" You know, basically he said, "Daddy—Daddy, I love you. Can you say it back to me?"

And then James's character says, "I ain't got time for that." And you know, as a young actor, trying to figure out how to be up to those giants' level and not, you know, tank the play because I'm just not good enough already to be able to—and they all took their time and waited for me and took me along and, you know. That's why I said it's one of the seminal moments of my life, to be able—and my parents were all involved in it, and they went to every version of it and—you know. And it was just really a family affair, especially—you know—young boy from Detroit who says he wants to be an actor and his parents were like, "We sent you to Harvard and you're going to be an actor?"

*[Jesse laughs.]*

"Really? Okay, baby. We're so proud." You know. And the joy that I gave my mother and my father—you know, to be able—especially my mother. She saw all of it. To be able to—that culminating in the Emmy win for—you know, for Johnny Cochrane. To be able to see that and know that, you know, that sacrifice that they made when they sent me to come to Detroit Country Day school, when they made that summer, they asked me where I'm gonna go to school. And I said I'll go to Saint Mary's *[inaudible]*. I know we can't afford to go to Country Day. You know? But I'm good, Dad. "No, son." And that moment, I knew my life spun. "No, your mother and I are gonna sacrifice and send you to Country Day." And in that moment, I saw my life turn, and I knew I had a responsibility to make sure that, whatever happened at Country Day, I was doing my best. Because they sacrificed everything for me to be able to go to that school. And when I won that headmaster's cup, which was the highest honor that Country Day gives, and the whole auditorium stood up, and I turned back, and I look at my father. And he was fumbling for his glasses. I knew that that was my thank you to him, to her, for all that they have done for me.

00:22:31 Jesse Host

00:22:40 Courtney Guest

You grew up in Detroit, literally—from what I understand—down the street from Hitsville, USA, the headquarters of Motown Records. *[Chuckling.]* Yeah, that's right. We used to sit on the stoop and watching people come and go. And they finally—they said, "Would you guys get out of here?! Boy, where do you—? Go! Go

somewhere!” So, we would just sit there and watch people come and go.

00:22:53 Jesse Host Were you old enough to know what that meant?  
00:22:56 Courtney Guest We didn’t know anybody. We were just hanging out. I was six. My sister was eight. We didn’t know anybody. We didn’t know anything. Maybe she knew. She probably knew. I didn’t know. You know.

00:23:08 Jesse Host *[Whispering.]* “That’s Levi Stubbs!”  
00:23:10 Courtney Guest Right. *[Laughs.]* “That’s Smokey Robinson!” You know. All of that. I mean, it’s a museum, now. I went back about three or four years ago, and I thought it would be, you know, one building. And they turned it—it’s actually the same two buildings, and they put a—you know, a little walkthrough. But it was—people were lined up ‘round the block. I mean, it’s a huge draw. You know, hopefully one day they’ll actually build a—you know, a museum building that, you know, really does it justice for what—you know, Berry Gordy and Smokey and *[inaudible]* and all the folks who made, you know, Motown what it was. You know. Back when it was just—you know, let’s just make some good music. You know?

00:23:55 Jesse Host Your family was really right in a bunch of kind of—in the crux of a bunch of social changes in Detroit, where you grew up, just by virtue of who they were and what the time was. You know what I mean? Like, your family moved into a White neighborhood very shortly before White flight hit. White flight completely transformed Detroit.

00:24:22 Courtney Guest Yeah, it just devastated our neighborhood, and we were on West Grand Boulevard, which was—you know, the tanks came up and down our street. And the houses were set way back. Used to be—it must have been a very, very wonderful, upscale kind of neighborhood. They had split these houses, which were set maybe 100 feet, 150 feet back, so the lawns were long. And they split these huge homes into fourplexes. So, there was two houses on the bottom, two apartments on the top. And we used to run from one side of the porch to the other and down the stairs and up the stairs. And I was into GI Joe, and I used to—when the tanks came down the street, I—before my parents could grab me, I ran down to say hello to a soldier. I was seven, six, something like that.

00:25:23 Jesse Host And the soldier turned his bayonet on me. And my parents finally got to me. And I was, of course, in a state of shock. But when we got to—when they finally bought a house—  
00:25:25 Courtney Guest Hold up. And you’re like maybe—  
00:25:26 Jesse Host Seven.  
00:25:28 Courtney Guest Yeah, I was about to say eight.  
Mm-mm. Six or seven, ‘cause by eight we had—we had moved away. But when we moved to the neighborhood where my parents bought a house, it was in ’69. And—the summer of ’69—and they were—it was a five-bedroom. Small bedrooms, but it was a five-bedroom house. And it was all White and we were one of the few Black families that moved over into that area. And I guess shortly around that time, Coleman Young—the African American mayor of Detroit, he—you know, and you can’t judge it by today, but he told the White folks to, you know, “We don’t need you. Get out of our city.”

And they went, “Okay.” And over that summer, they did. And took their tax base and the good schools and they moved 25 miles out,



50 miles out. And initially it was—you know, it was like, “Yeeah! We got our city!” But it was a death nell. And our block went from all White and a few Blacks to all Black and a few Whites. And our school flipped overnight. And our parents recognized and realized they would never get their money out of their house. And we—the focus of the school shifted from, you know, going to school and getting—you know, the grades and everything. We still got A’s. But the focus and the peer pressure was about what clothes you had on and fighting. And in the middle of the semester, our parents snatched us out of there and put us in Catholic schools.

And we went from being in an all-Black environment to being an all-White environment with no—you know—discussion about how to navigate.

00:27:20	Jesse	Host	How old were you?
00:27:21	Courtney	Guest	Fourth grade. 11, 12, something like that. My sister was sixth grade. So, we had packed our bags—my sister and I—‘cause we got wind of what was about to happen, packed our bags, and we were—we had a little bag, and we were gonna run away or something. <i>[Chuckles.]</i> My parents, that night they found our little suitcases, little backpacks, whatever we had. And they said, you know, we’re going to another school. And a good friend of theirs was one of the teachers at Mother of Our Savior. Yeah, that was the name of the school.
00:27:53	Jesse	Host	We’ll finish up with Courtney B. Vance in just a minute. We’ll ask him what it’s like to be married to Angela Bassett. He’s the only guy who knows! And he’s gonna tell us! It’s <i>Bullseye</i> , from <a href="http://MaximumFun.org">MaximumFun.org</a> and NPR.
00:28:06	Promo	Clip	<b>Music:</b> Bright orchestral music.

**Hal Lublin:** If you’re sick of constantly arguing with the people closest to you about topics that really aren’t going to change the world, we’re here to take that stress off your shoulders. We take care of it for you on *We Got This with Mark and Hal*.

**Mark Gagliardi:** That’s right, Hal! If you have a subjective question that you want answered objectively once and for all time for all of the people of the world—questions like who’s the best Disney villain? Mac or PC? Or should you put ketchup on a hotdog? That’s why we’re here.

**Hal:** Yes, I get that these are the biggest questions of our time. And we’re often joined by special guests like Nathan Fillion, Orlando Jones, and Paget Brewster. So, let Mark and Hal take care of it for you on *We Got This with Mark and Hal*, weekly on [Maximum Fun](http://MaximumFun.org).

00:28:51	Music	Transition	<i>[Music ends.]</i> Chiming synth with a steady beat.
00:28:56	Jesse	Host	It’s <i>Bullseye</i> . I’m Jesse Thorn. I’m talking with actor Courtney B. Vance, star of the new AMC show, <i>61<sup>st</sup> Street</i> . Let’s get back into our conversation.
00:29:12	Courtney	Guest	What is something about acting that you have learned from your wife, Angela Bassett?
00:29:15	Jesse	Host	Mm. There’s nobody like her. She’s a very good actor.

00:29:17	Courtney	Guest	She's beyond. And I'm like everyone else. I'm in awe of who she is and what she can do.
00:29:26	Jesse	Host	Can she—okay, the things that she does—I've never seen her onstage; the things she does in a movie, is she capable of doing those to you in your home? <i>[Laughs.]</i>
00:29:35	Courtney	Guest	She is capable of it. <i>[Chuckles.]</i> Thank god, she's a nice person.
00:29:40	Jesse	Host	Okay. She seems nice!
00:29:41	Courtney	Guest	Yeah. The sweetest—she's the <u>sweetest</u> .
00:29:44	Jesse	Host	There's not a lot of people who could compete with James Earl Jones on the power of a look, but I think she might be one of 'em! So.
00:29:51	Courtney	Guest	My goodness, she is the sweetest southern girl. She's from St. Pete, Florida. So, that was just what—you know—endeared me to her. She's just as sweet as they come. I mean, the movie roles that—you know, she's Tina and you know, and setting the car on fire and walking away. But that's not who she is. She's the quietest, softest. You know, doesn't wanna inconvenience anyone. You know. So. But she is, in terms of her acting, there is nobody that outworks her. And on top of all of that, she's got a photographic memory. So, you know, once she starts something, she can be looking—she'll be looking at television, and on the commercial breaks she'll learn her lines. And I'm—she has the ability to synthesize 100 pages of—I mean, she was doing surrogate work for Hillary Clinton, and they gave her—there was just mounds and mounds of papers that she had to digest and then go out on the road and talk about. You know, in a crowd of people that were at a content party, and just talk about Hillary and her programs and her policies.

And I saw the paperwork that she was going over, and I'm like *[whisper]* wow, she's going to do that. How is she gonna—are you gonna take cards around with you, baby? What are you gonna—? “No, Courtney, I gotta read all these papers and then I gotta—I gotta go, honey. I gotta—” *[Whispering.]* Okay, let me let you get to it. And went out there on the road and everybody was like, “Courtney, she's a superstar! She's just—she's—it's all hers! It's like she wrote it! *[Whispers.]* I said I know. I know!

I don't know anybody who can do that. You know. So, if she—she could run for office. She could be *[chuckles]*—you know. 'Cause when you actually see what the politicians do, they have people that come around. I mean, they give—okay, when you—you know, when you see those debates, those are—those are hours and hours of ingesting material so that you can be up there and speak without going, “Um—um. Uh. What—” As soon as that “um” happens, you project—you don't know what you're talking about. So, you—it has to be in you. So, I cannot do that. You know? And when she does speeches, she's the same way. She—I have to write it. You know, start to write—you know, three months before and just add a little bit here and a little bit there and, you know, get my speech. She's—you know, eh. I say, “Baby, you gotta write your speech.”

“I'm thinking about it, Court.”

“Okay. It's tomorrow, hun.”

[Softly.] “I know. I know. It’s in my mind.” And on the way there, it’s being written.

I said, “Who does that?!” [Laughs.] And just goes up there—and I’ve seen her do a speech for 10,000, you know, African American women in Roanoke or Raleigh. I think it was Raleigh, North Carolina. And she got up there and rocked that. It was like a rock concert. It was just—I said, “Oh my goodness! Who is this woman!?”

00:32:57 Jesse Host

You started your career sharing a stage with James Earl Jones, a firehose of conviction and charisma if ever such a thing existed in the Earth. A person with more [chuckling] presence than could possibly exist in the world. And, you know, as we heard in that scene—you know, the character that you played in *Fences* was maybe not so far in manner from yours. You’re sitting here across from me. You’re a pretty gentle guy. But recently, you’ve had a couple of big parts as people with extraordinary conviction, extraordinarily convicted performers—in Johnny Cochrane and C.L. Franklin. You know. Those are two [chuckles] 12 out of 10 performers. Right?

So, do you have to talk yourself into those choices? Like, do you have to get yourself to that place? Or is that facile for you? Is that just available to you to have that?

00:33:57 Courtney Guest

Not at all. You know, some roles—for me—are easier to slip into than others. And I have to make decisions, ‘cause everything—for me, it’s, “What’s the obstacle and how am I going to deal with it?” And for me, Johnny Cochrane—I had met him, you know, at a party that a friend of my wife and I’s—a dear friend of my wife and I’s, Mr. Wren Brown—invited us to. And we—but I, you know, I was shy. And you know, he was the life of the party, and I was just glad to be there. And so, I didn’t really meet him, per se, that I remember. But I—the decision I had to make was what am I gonna do? ‘Cause there’s as much information on him as there is on anybody on this Earth. So. And as much video footage of him.

But I felt that I would be overwhelmed if I began that process, and that I would be—you know—trying to imitate him. So, I made the decision not to look at anything and not to read anything, except Jeffery Toobin’s book, *The Run of Your Life*. And I read it twice. And I saw that—when I read the book, I saw that he—his mother put him in an all-White school for grade school or high school or something like that. And that she knew—she said that he’s the one, because he had four brothers and sisters, something like that. And she said he’s the one that would be able to deal with that. And those White, young people and the teachers and all will lead him; he’ll be able to handle it and be able to find his way and be led up.

And I said, [whispers] “Wow. That’s what my parents did.” I said, “That’s all I need.” I read the book two times, put it down. ‘Cause I knew that once we started doing the project—and we would be doing ten episodes. And then I knew we were gonna be doing two and three at the same time. I wouldn’t have time to look at footage. I just needed to get a kernel of truth and walk out on faith. And that’s what I did. ‘Cause I said the scripts are so good; if I miss some

nuance, I think the audiences will forgive that in me. So, that's—for that one, that's how I approached it. I said I'm gonna go out on faith. 'Cause Johnny Cochrane did amazing things and passed away. And we actually went to his homegoing, at West Hampton's Church of God and Christ.

And so, I said I'm living. I'm breathing. Right now, for me, I am going to just be me as I'm reading him, doing him. And hopefully, the two of those will come together. And I jumped out there, jumped off the diving board and went for it.

00:36:44 Sound Effect Transition

Music swells and fades.

00:36:45 Clip Clip

**Johnny Cochrane (*The People v. O.J. Simpson*):** It is not that simple. This is the United States of America, and we are defending a Black man who is fighting to prove his innocence. Now, I know I don't have to give anyone here a civics lesson about the historic injustices visited upon Black men for no other reason other than they're Black. We didn't introduce that into this trial. We didn't introduce that into this case. It is a plain and simple fact. But we would not be doing our job if we did not at least talk about how race plays a part in this trial! Now, if that is playing "the race card"... so be it.

00:37:21 Sound Effect Transition

Music swells and fades.

00:37:22 Jesse Host

I feel like "faith" is a good word there, because it is—right? Like, I said "conviction" before, I think, but—

00:37:29 Courtney Guest

It's a faith walk.

00:37:30 Jesse Host

Right? Like Johnny Cochrane, the defense attorney, he doesn't know if his client is guilty or not.

*[Courtney affirms.]*

But he has to believe that his client is not guilty, or else how can he do his job?

00:37:40 Courtney Guest

He doesn't wanna know.

00:37:41 Jesse Host

It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter.

00:37:42 Courtney Guest

They don't wanna know. They don't wanna know whether you're guilty. *[Stammering.]* Just the facts, and we're gonna manipulate the facts. And that's what they do. I mean, it's just—

00:37:49 Jesse Host

But he also, like in any situation where he didn't belong—right? Whether he's the Black guy in an all-White school or whatever, it's act like you know. Right? It's like you just gotta step out across and *[chuckles]* keep walking until you realize there's no ground underneath you.

00:38:05 Courtney Guest

That's right. And most of the times—I remember when they were doing that scene where they visited O.J.'s house that—you know, he understood that the trial was not about the truth. He understood that the trial was not whether he did it or not. He understood that the trial was about celebrity. It was about Black versus White. And so, when Marcia Clark started, he knew that he saw the sheets—that people said what was important to them and how they saw him and how they saw her. He saw what the juries had said about him and her, and he took it to heart. And he made mental notes. And she saw it and said, "Eh. That's not important. I know what I'm doing. They'll believe me." Because she thought this case was like any other case that she had tried. It was not. It was not about—like

any case that she had tried, and she needed help, and she didn't realize it until it was too late, too far in the case when she realized, "They think I'm cold and hard. Let me change my look."

By that time, it was too late. "What are you doing? What are you—? She's changing her look! [Chuckles judgmentally.] Look at—she's—" So, she was chasing it, as opposed to being on top of it. And Johnny recognized, "I'm gonna be on top of this."

00:39:18 Jesse Host

And you, as an actor, you can't chase it. You've gotta jump out. [Laughs.]

00:39:23 Courtney Guest

You gotta be on top of it. You gotta be right from the—you know, just jump out there and go for it. And just—you know. 'Cause we were doing—we were doing three, four, five episodes at the same time. So, you can't be, "Okay, hold on. Let me look at my video footage. Eh. Mm. Uh. Oh. Okay, I'm ready now." Can't do that! You just gotta go. And casting-wise, soon as I put on that wig, I said, "Oh, that's me! I do look like him. I'm ready." The wig was the key to my character. The wig was. Anyway. Thank you so much.

00:39:55 Jesse Host

Well, Courtney B. Vance, I could talk to you about this for another couple hours, but we're out of time. So, thank you for making the time to come and talk to me.

00:40:02 Courtney Guest

[Whispering.] Great interview. Great interview. Thank you.

00:40:07 Jesse Host

Courtney B. Vance, folks. His newest show is called *61<sup>st</sup> Street*. You can watch it now, on AMC. Uh, [chuckles] look. Courtney's been in a lot of amazing things. But rent the movie *Hamburger Hill* or watch it on streaming or even just type it into YouTube and watch the scene where he's teaching everybody how to use a toothbrush. Because it is amazing.

00:40:30 Music Transition

Bright, twangy synth with a steady beat.

00:40:35 Jesse Host

That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye*, created from the homes me and the staff of Maximum Fun, in and around greater Los Angeles, California. The other day, I came outside, and everybody was out on the street on my block. And it turns out, somebody in the middle of the day had just walked down the street carving the letter "R" into everyone's car hood. Gotta go to the body shop.

Our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producers are Jesus Ambrosio, Valerie Moffat and Richard Robey. We get booking help from Mara Davis. Our interstitial music is by Dan Wally, also known as DJW. Our theme song is called "Huddle Formation". It was recorded by the group The Go! Team. Thanks to them and to their label, Memphis Industries.

*Bullseye* is on YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook. You can follow us in all of those places. We share our interviews there. And I think that's about it. Just remember: all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

00:41:32 Promo Promo

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

[Music fades out.]