

00:00:00	Jesse Thorn	Host	<p>It's <i>Bullseye</i>. I'm Jesse Thorn. I wanna recommend a record to you. It's called <i>Laughing So Hard It Hurts</i>. It's by my next guest, Mavi. He's a rapper from Charlotte, North Carolina. The album came out late last year. <i>Laughing So Hard It Hurts</i> is an album about pain. The pain of losing a friend and loved ones, the pain of generational trauma, of relationships ending. None of this is necessarily new territory in hip-hop. But what makes Mavi's latest record so special is its vulnerability. Through his rhymes, the beautiful, subdued production, he doesn't tell you about pain. You feel it with him.</p>
00:00:40	Music	Music	<p>"High John" from the album <i>Laughing So Hard It Hurts</i> by Mavi.</p> <p><i>Yeah, yeah-yeah</i> <i>Yeah</i></p> <p><i>Praying they still make love in my size</i> <i>Sober up and wipe the crust out my eyes</i> <i>My last integrity and trust a trail of crumbs for my bride</i> <i>Is it a return or a failure to succumb to the tide?</i> <i>When Charlotte people seen folks cherish me was such a surprise</i> <i>They seeing something we not</i></p> <p><i>[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.]</i></p>
00:01:04	Jesse	Host	<p>Mavi crams 16 songs into 32 minutes on <i>Laughing So Hard It Hurts</i>. He's still early in his career, but he has a lot to say. I'm grateful to get to talk to him. And a quick note before we get into this interview, we did have some technical issues during the recording. So, we had to use Mavi's backup recording from Zoom. So, if it sounds a little different from your usual <i>Bullseye</i> interview—well, that's the reason why.</p> <p><i>[Music fades in.]</i></p>
00:01:36	Music	Music	<p>It's a really great conversation. Amazing dude. Let's kick things off with another song off <i>Laughing So Hard It Hurts</i>: "Doves".</p> <p>"Doves" from the album <i>Laughing So Hard It Hurts</i> by Mavi.</p> <p><i>Yeah, yeah</i> <i>Every turn of page, just another issue</i> <i>Good days is a double-edged blade, Ginsu</i> <i>I can't count a frame where I didn't miss you</i> <i>I been outer space, knocking trying to get through</i> <i>High as— as close to consistent, my mental</i> <i>I been drinking under the table, I thought you quit, fool?</i> <i>I don't think you know 'bout reverence and ridicule</i> <i>I don't think you know 'bout theft as founding principle</i></p> <p><i>[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.]</i></p>
00:01:56	Jesse	Host	Mavi, welcome to <i>Bullseye</i> . It's nice to have you on the show.
00:01:59	Mavi	Guest	Thank you so much for having me. I'm like so stoked to be here.
00:02:02	Jesse	Host	I'm glad that you like your record. I can see you there. The like high point in the history of this show of people enjoying listening to their

record is—I had one of the Pointer Sisters in studio with me one time, and she just started singing along to herself. And I was like, “Yeah, that’s what’s up.” *[Laughs.]*

00:02:20 Mavi Guest Well, both of those happening is both a super huge accomplishment—having the Pointer Sisters and being able to witness like a sort of live performance, since you’re playing the song.

00:02:32 Jesse Host I mean, it’s just nice when people like their records. You know what I mean? Like, I understand the feeling of wanting to hide from your own thing that you poured 20,000 hours into, but I also just like it when somebody likes their song. And you were getting down.

00:02:47 Mavi Guest Thank you, man. It’s definitely weird hearing your own voice. But you know, you do it for a reason. *[Chuckles.]*

00:02:54 Jesse Host It’s never stopped being weird to me. I’ve been doing this for 20 years now. So.

00:02:58 Mavi Guest Literally, like I don’t think it’ll ever be regular.

00:03:03 Jesse Host Mavi, you’re in Charlotte, North Carolina, which is where you’re from.

[Mavi confirms.]

00:03:13 Mavi Guest Did you have hometown rap music when you were a kid?
Um, relatively. Part of it was that I was walking around the crater the absence of hometown rap music kind of created. So, I was actually talking to a guy named *[inaudible]*. He’s like a big rapper from here, and he organized a lot of the rap community before a lot of things—before a lot of people got off the ground. And one of the things we were talking about in Charlotte is Charlotte is primarily a banking city. It’s the second largest banking city in America, behind New York City. And I think Charlotte’s hip-hop tradition is stifled by the lack of just instrumental music tradition. It’s not a city that people move to with a horn. It’s a city people move to with a suit. You know? And I think that kind of informs the development of our scene.

00:04:11 Jesse Host When I was a kid, my best friend’s dad was a semi-professional musician, a drummer. And he had a drum set in his basement and eventually a studio. And my friend played trumpet and his sister played flute. And it was like, oh—you know, Chloe was at Bimbo’s playing with Dizzy Gillespie this week or whatever. And the thing that I saw was what it was like to have a quote/unquote “musical family”, whereas nobody in my family really played an instrument. And I know that you grew up with a studio in your basement. So, what did that mean, practically, for your life?

00:04:49 Mavi Guest It meant that sometimes I would go to school—in the 4th grade, people would tell me, you know, “You smell like weed.” And I didn’t know what weed was.

[They chuckle.]

It meant that, as I grew—like a lot of people that I know now just from being a rapper just in the Charlotte scene, just people who’ve grown on to like move from being a performer primarily and it’s like executive *[inaudible]* like they know my father. *[Chuckles.]* And it

			means that like the demystified part of rapping and being a rapper was available to me the entire time.
00:05:33	Jesse	Host	I read you talking about some of the rappers that you listened to as a kid and teenager. And I thought, well, these can only be the rappers that a guy whose dad had a rap studio in the basement listened to. 'Cause you were talking about, "Oh yeah, when I was a little kid, I was really inspired by 'Let's Get Free' by Dead Prez."
			I was like <i>[laughing]</i> , "Yeah, I don't know, when I was a kid I was inspired by Tony! Toni! Toné!" No offense to Tony! Toni! Toné!, they're great. But I wasn't listening to Paris Records when I was seven. You know what I mean? How did you end up on that lane as a literal child?
00:06:14	Mavi	Guest	Yeah, it's just 'cause my dad has a really intense and specific hip-hop taste. It was definitely a lot of Dead Prez. A lot of Mobb Deep. A lot of Wu-Tang. Very New York tilt. So, he brought a lot of Nas. He's a real hip-hop purist. <i>[Inaudible]</i> .
00:06:37	Music	Music	"DOOMSday" from the album <i>Operation: Doomsday</i> by MF DOOM. <i>I used to cop a lot But never copped no drop Hold mics like ponytails, tight, and bob a lot Stop and stick around Come through and dig the sound Of the fly brown six-o sicko psycho who throws his— around</i> <i>[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.]</i>
00:06:52	Mavi	Guest	I think one thing I can be grateful to my father for is—you know how we were just talking about how sometimes our fathers were like really intense about introducing us to everything about "screw being like a man", like about being a dude. You know? Like you need to hear this album in order to be a dude. <i>[Chuckles.]</i> I'm not gonna let you leave my house without you being a dude. And so, my dad's hip-hop education that he imbued me with was definitely like steering toward that. You know?
00:07:35	Jesse	Host	I mean, that's a pretty intense set of aesthetic things for a kid, I think. Like, leaving aside the question of whether they're good, that's a long list of great things. But like, <i>[laughing]</i> like Mobb Deep!
00:07:51	Mavi	Guest	The gentlest music my dad would play riding around in the car would be like The Roots' album.
00:07:57	Jesse	Host	You're listening to Mobb Deep, you're like, "I'm only eight, but my mind is older."
00:08:02	Mavi	Guest	<i>[Inaudible]</i> And he's jamming it super loud. Like he's driving and he's like singing along, all types of crazy things. Like, man. And I think—I gotta mature understanding of hip-hop as the expression of the hypermasculine ideal through my father's specific tastes. And I learned that necessarily—rap isn't necessarily about doing what you heard someone say in a rap song. Sometimes, it's about the fact that you're able—this is the only place where you're able to say these sorts of things.
00:08:42	Music	Music	"Spoiled Brat" from the album <i>Laughing So Hard It Hurts</i> by Mavi.

Yeah, yeah

*You wouldn't rap like that if you want it
You wouldn't act like that if you want it
I was on backpack path, stunting
I can't wear pats on back, badge of honor
I had an asthma attack when we rushed 'em
I quit the Xanax, a stab in the stomach
Got twice the gravity, half the circumference*

00:08:58 Jesse Host *[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue.]*
We've got more with Mavi still to come after a break. Stay with us.
00:09:05 Music Music It's *Bullseye*, from [MaximumFun.org](https://www.maximumfun.org) and NPR.
[Volume increases.]

*Reason she put hands on me, chemical
When I couldn't touch these bands, wasn't pitiful
Knew man dem wicked, I'm wicked too
New fans, I'm feeling invincible
New dance steps*

00:09:14 Music Transition *[Song fades out.]*
00:09:18 Jesse Host Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.
Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. I'm talking with Mavi.
He's a rapper from Charlotte, North Carolina. Last year, he released
his album *Laughing So Hard It Hurts*. It was one of my favorites
from 2022. Let's get back into our conversation.

00:09:41 Mavi Guest Your rapping is a lot tighter and punchier on the new record. Was
that a choice that you made?
Choice. Choice is interesting. A lot of this album... wasn't of my
choosing. The subject matter wasn't of my choosing. The fact that I
needed to write it. The writing on it kind of descended onto me. I
had an album before that couldn't come out because of sample
clearance issues. And so, this album—in terms of it sonically kind of
reflects that I couldn't use any samples, from a beat perspective.
And so, the rapping had to adjust. Sometimes with samples and
beats, there's an *[inaudible]* in between that like—where all the
magic happens. You know?

00:10:30 Music Music "Baking Soda" from the album *Laughing So Hard It Hurts* by Mavi.

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah

*Palette on the stove with the baking soda
I'ma add another stroke then the painting sold
Habits sent me places that I can't control
I established it alone, nothing major though
Intimately in the business of stretching out lessons
Crammed in the business of pressure invested
From my early days verbal a vestige
Never quite know if they heard what I said
From the smolder fake cold, unaffected
See the glow of coals when scoping for meds
I don't owe no one else but the reverend*

*Who got my OG still folding her hands?
We got poles, why I flow so accessible
Nothing in an excess but excess of course*

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

00:11:05 Mavi Guest But yeah, definitely tighter and swifter. Definitely more of a cudgel than a scalpel on this one. But I'm getting back into my scalpel bag on the next one.

Okay, I told you how my tastes in rap is bimodal in that way. Different types of like performances I really can appreciate—from like a linguistic word sense and from true performance and like vocal leadership, vocal command sense. Right? And my frustration is—as a vocalist primarily—choice and ability are impossible to parse from one another to the listener, to the uninitiated listener. And I find myself going back and forth back and forth back and forth between my two favorite rappers. You know?

00:12:05 Jesse Host Let's hear a little bit from my guest, Mavi's, new record, which is called *Laughing So Hard It Hurts*. This song is called "High John".

00:12:13 Music Music "High John" from the album *Laughing So Hard It Hurts* by Mavi.

*Praying they still make love in my size
Sober up and wipe the crust out my eyes
My last integrity and trust a trail of crumbs for my bride
Is it a return or a failure to succumb to the tide?
When Charlotte people seen folks cherish me was such a surprise
They seeing something we not
Since doctors sliced open my stomach at five
More often than not at sustenance a nah before a nod
It's stock in the Glock
I'm crashing if it's eye for an eye
Poppa taught me a lot*

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

00:12:35 Jesse Host High John the Conqueror is like a folkloric figure. How did you come to name a record after him?

00:12:44 Mavi Guest My last album was called *[inaudible]*—my previous album was *Let The Sun Talk*. My main thing is tying in spiritual traditions as like our framework for what I'm trying to do. Yeah. Which is something I got from the Nas, Rakim, Ghostface like vein of my rap education with their just adherence to *[inaudible]*. Even like the Christian rappers, like DMX and the Chance the Rapper. I love that. I love when people have a greater narrative that their rap is just like a testimonial thing. So, me choosing High John the Conqueror as my muse for this album, I don't know. I think I came up with the title first. And I read the story of High John II, and then I was like, "Oh, this is perfect." Because as much as the title was just like *Laughing So Hard It Hurts*, which is just a familiar phrase, it's also like *Laughing So Hard It Hurts*. Like, two separate types.

And the story of High John the Conqueror, as the trickster like Br'er Rabbit kind of African American folkloric figure of the state and wit

and outsmarting the oppression from slavery and Jim Crow through the power of laughter and the ability of laughter to shorten time, quicken something, as like a—as a painkiller of sorts. That just really encapsulated the story I was trying to tell about my own life with this album, and the things of my own existence that I wanted address with this album.

00:14:36 Jesse Host

I was thinking about you going on this big tour with Jack Harlow a few years ago, and it was like your first big tour. And I had this conversation with a road engineer about touring—‘cause I’ve never toured on like—with like a bus, where you like take a shower at the venue and that kind of thing. And he was telling me that he started running just because it was like something that he could have control over when he was on the road. Like, he didn’t need to have to be in a special place to do it. He didn’t need to have someone there with him to do it. And I was thinking of that kind of weird combination of like being in yourself and being out of yourself and like being with a bunch of people and being lonely that is that life.

00:15:29 Mavi Guest

Oh man, it’s an incredible loneliness, but like also a crazy level of leadership, because—okay, two things. One, I had to leave my whole team. Shout out to my team, for like my managers and all that. But I had to like leave the squad. And at the same time, like just be a contributor, an opener, to like a greater show. And just wanted to—it’s just like being the star of your own team and then getting traded to a championship team, and then you need to make the corner three. You know? And that was a crazy experience.

And then, just that sacrifice to like how the course of the day goes, because travel takes up so much time. You have to do the same things with the same amount of effectiveness and with a higher amount of efficiency as things go on. Just sacrificing myself to the process, sacrificing myself to the show, doing anything to give it to the show. If I had to spend my last dollar, if I had to spend 1000 more dollars than I had just to get to the next show, we’re gonna figure it out after we finish this show. That process actually made me feel so purposeful and so like incredible. And all sorts of crazy things were happening, though. While we were on tour, I went and I linked with one of my homegirls from college. And after the afterparty following the show in St. Louis—you know, she had had a few or whatever. And we had gotten into some kind of argument, like following her having an altercation with a guy out in the street where I’m like, “Hey, let’s not do this in front of the guys, ‘cause everybody’s here and I’m just an opener. We are being the image of grace, at least.”

So, we get in the car. She’s frustrated. She starts flooring the gas. Like flooring it. Speeding through red lights and stuff. And I’m like, “What is going on?” So, we get t-boned, smashed. Car gets finished. Everybody in the car breaks their neck—in my car and in the other car. Except for me! I just break my face and have like a really gnarly concussion. So, that’s basically the mental state that I completed that entire second leg of the tour—on some very post-concussive, hyper-emotional, manic kind of mind state. And so, yeah, doing it while in that mind state just accentuated the sacrifice to the circumstances.

00:18:01 Jesse Host How did you handle getting off tour?
00:18:03 Mavi Guest The night of the last show, right before it was time to go to sound check, I had the craziest mental breakdown of my life—like the craziest. Because I was flat broke. My uncle had died while I was on tour. I didn't have enough money after coming back from the car accident and all of that stuff to go to his funeral. I was actually feeling like actually crazy—*[chuckling]* like on a day-to-day. I was feeling my emotions fluctuate. I would start crying in the middle of the day. I didn't really have much to go home to. I had left out of school an additional semester to be able to go on tour. I had forgone getting an apartment to go on tour.

And I just felt like I wasn't living for anything when I didn't have the show to live for. And that made me feel incredibly small and incredibly like—whereas I took pleasure in my smallness when I was sacrificing control to the ability to float, like when you're in the water. You know, you've gotta relax all your muscles. When it was time to swim again and I was way in the middle of the sea, that created a panic within me that I just can't begin to describe. You know?

00:19:26 Jesse Host I know that what you're describing—that middle of the sea feeling—because there is—when you're touring hard, and you were, you have a point of light to swim towards every single day, right? You know that you've gotta go on at 9:10 or whatever it is. You gotta get to Racine to do the Racine show.

[Mavi chuckles.]

00:19:58 Mavi Guest All rap tours stop in Racine, Wisconsin, right? That's true.
00:20:00 Jesse Host *[Laughs.]* For sure. But then, when you're done with that you're like—especially if you didn't really make any money, you're like, okay, well, here I am. I quit school. I don't have an apartment. *[Chuckling.]* And I don't have a show to go to tonight where people are gonna applaud me. Nobody's gonna scream my name tonight. You know. Tomorrow night, after my over drafted account gets me the last flight before Chase Bank starts calling my phone number, no one's gonna chant for me. For the first night in about a month. That's impossible. *[Laughs.]* Or at least, it was. It may be, sometimes. It may be, sometimes. Yeah. I threw everything into the fire, and I would do it again.

00:20:50 Jesse Host We're taking a break. We'll be back in just a second. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.
00:20:57 Promo Clip **Music:** High tempo, brassy music.

Alex Schmidt: Hi, I'm Alex Schmidt.

Katie Goldin: And I'm Katie Goldin.

Alex: And we make *Secretly Incredibly Fascinating*, a podcast about why seemingly ordinary stuff is actually the title of the podcast.

Katie: Using tons of research, we take a joyful look at history and science and stories!

Alex: And jokes!

Katie: About the ordinary stuff in your life, 'cause that's what makes those things amazing.

Alex: Also, jokes!

Katie: So, get excited about paperclips.

Alex: Get thrilled about pigeons.

Katie: Get all psyched up and running around the room about the imperial system of weights and measurements!

Alex: For real, there's whole episodes about that stuff. Hear them any time, and hear new episodes Mondays, at MaximumFun.org.

[Music fades out.]

00:21:37 Music Transition
00:21:42 Jesse Host

Thumpy synth with light vocalizations. It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is rapper Mavi. Last year, he released an album called *Laughing So Hard It Hurts*. When I talked to him, I told him I heard a lot of loneliness in the songs. Mavi agreed, but he added that there's a lot of shame as well, and he named two songs.

00:22:09 Music Music

The first was "Having My Way". It's got a bouncy kind of trappish beat. And on the surface, he's rapping about—you know—having his way.

"Having My Way" from the album *Laughing So Hard It Hurts* by Mavi.

*Having my way, having my way with this
Know what they say, and you still wait for me
You can't change my fate and yet you pray for me
I don't know my date, but I know my way just ain't getting killed
Pops snatched my chain, another broken link replaced it.*

00:22:26 Jesse Host

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

The second is called "Known Unknowns". It's a sultry, sensual track about reuniting with a high school crush.

00:22:33 Music Music

"Known Unknowns" from the album *Laughing So Hard It Hurts* by Mavi.

*Step on snow, step on leaves, step on growth, step on me
Episodes I just hope that my folks never see.
I don't know that my heart got a soul left to reach
Pile of bones by the soles of my feet
Got me preaching.*

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

00:22:43 Jesse Host Talking about your wins is like 80%+ of hip-hop. But Mavi asks that you listen a little closer.

00:22:53 Mavi Guest But it's actually like super shameful. "Having My Way" is about like that mania feeling that I was telling you on the post-concussive syndrome, how having my way in the literal sense isolated me and kind of made me look like a jerk, but I kind of didn't care because I was in service of something greater. God gonna have his way with me, still. You know? *[Chuckles.]* And "Known Unknowns" is the same thing. It wasn't necessarily, "Hey, I am now confident and assured and I can dress good, and I smell good in a way that gives me this access to these potential advances." It was more that like, "Hey, I feel puffed up by my material and career advances to where I'm gonna be reckless enough to inspire woo." You know? And both of those tendencies that like really showed their—reared their ugly heads during the tour and post-tour time period are things that I had to—when the mania calmed down, when my brain reoriented itself into a stable configuration, when it was time to go home, I had to be ashamed of it. And be ashamed of my mouth. You know?

00:24:13 Jesse Host How did you deal with that?

00:24:16 Mavi Guest *[Sing-songing.]* Alcoholism!

[They chuckle.]

00:24:30 Jesse Host Yeah. I learned I could not drink, or I would drink. I can't lowercase D drink. You know?

00:24:36 Mavi Guest I read a few interviews where you were a couple months out of giving up smoking weed too.

00:24:36 Mavi Guest Yeah, I'm still on that. Three months. I'm doing good, man! I'm doing good. Everybody—sometimes people tell me like, "Oh, you seem so much clearer now."

I would be like, "That's like so offensive to me." Like, if you thought I stopped smoking weed—which is like one of God's greatest gifts to Earth—to be more easily perceived by you, like how incredibly egomaniacal are you?

[They laugh.]

00:24:03 Jesse Host What led you to choose this?

00:24:06 Mavi Guest I needed more energy. And I was releasing this album that was so different from anything that I'd ever done, and I needed to be able to verifiably assess the results lucidly. I needed to feel bad about what I needed to feel about, feel ashamed about what I needed to feel ashamed about, feel like I came up short wherever I needed to feel like I came up short at. And not have anything stain that clear window.

00:25:40 Jesse Host What about being sad? It's been hard to be sad about stuff with the pandemic.

00:25:47 Mavi Guest For sure. For sure, bro. Like, I don't have much room in life to not be sad. Being sad is—it's like my co-pilot. You know?

00:26:02 Jesse Host You were smiling, but one time my therapist—I was describing some sad thing from my life, and I was smiling about it like, "Yep! Look at this, huh!?"

She said, "I'm not supposed to tell you this, but that's something called 'incongruous affect'." And I was like, oh, okay.

00:26:18	Mavi	Guest	<p><i>[They chuckle.]</i> Yeah, definitely. Hey, I'm probably the king of that. Like, anytime someone's like really mad at me and they're like, "Do you think this is funny?!"</p> <p>And I'm like giggling because—nooo, like you misunderstand me. Like, it's so weird being—that's why the album's called what it is. You know? It's incongruent affect, the album—<i>Laughing So Hard It Hurts</i>. You know?</p>
00:26:46	Jesse	Host	Well, Mavi, thank you so much for taking all this time to talk to me. It was really nice to get to know you. Congratulations on this great record.
00:26:52	Mavi	Guest	Thank you, Jesse, man. And many, many more. Hopefully you get to have me back, man. I hope I—hope I do good enough where you're like, "Nah, this man's—he can still rap. Let's have him back."
00:27:04	Jesse	Host	Mavi. His new album, <i>Laughing So Hard It Hurts</i> —it's really fantastic. You can stream it or buy it pretty much anywhere.
00:27:11	Music	Transition	Jazzy synth.
00:27:13	Jesse	Host	That's the end of another episode of <i>Bullseye</i> . <i>Bullseye</i> is created from the homes of me and the staff of Maximum Fun, in and around greater Los Angeles, California. Outside my house, the big, giant, old tree has a few branches that are only being held up by other branches. They've been there for like a week. I don't know what to tell you about this tree. I'll tell you; I am not gonna park my car underneath it.
			<p>The show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producers are Jesus Ambrosio and Richard Robey. Our production fellows at Maximum Fun are Tabatha Myers and Bryanna Paz. We got help booking from Mara Davis. Our interstitial music is composed and provided to us by DJW, the great Dan Wally. Our theme song is by The Go! Team. It's called "Huddle Formation". Our thanks to The Go! Team. Our thanks to their label, Memphis Industries.</p> <p><i>Bullseye</i> is on YouTube and Twitter and Facebook. Find us in any of those places. Follow us. We will share with you our interviews. And I think that's about it. Just remember: all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.</p>
00:28:17	Promo	Promo	<p>Speaker: <i>Bullseye with Jesse Thorn</i> is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.</p> <p><i>[Music fades out.]</i></p>