

00:00:00	Music	Transition	Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.
00:00:01	Promo	Promo	Speaker: <i>Bullseye with Jesse Thorn</i> is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.
00:00:13	Music	Transition	<i>[Music fades out.]</i> “Huddle Formation” from the album <i>Thunder, Lightning, Strike</i> by The Go! Team. A fast, upbeat, peppy song. Music plays as Jesse speaks, then fades out.
00:00:19	Jesse Thorn	Host	It’s Bullseye. I’m Jesse Thorn. Next up, Little Brother. They’re a rap group from North Carolina. The three original members—Phonte, Big Pooh, and 9 th Wonder, for those of you keeping score at home—met in college. They were living in the dorms at North Carolina Central University. And they got into making music. 9 th Wonder was making beats on his computer. Phonte and Big Pooh were laying down verses on an old church microphone. The three of them weren’t imagining a rags to riches story. They were basically three music geeks in a dorm room. They did do open mics and local shows. It wasn’t going anywhere in particular. North Carolina wasn’t exactly New York or Atlanta. The clubs weren’t exactly thick with talent scouts. Then, Little Brother shared some songs on a hip-hop message board called Okayplayer. It was 2001. Sharing music on the web was kind of a new thing. <i>[Music fades in.]</i> The three of them just wanted some feedback, but they ended up getting a career.
00:01:22	Music	Music	“The Way You Do It” from the album <i>The Way You Do It/The Get Up</i> by Little Brother. <i>Yo, six minutes to showtime, I was out in the rain With— Big Pooh going over some things No money in our pockets, just a buck and some change Ran up in the hideaway with— screaming our names Took the stage like a jet soaring Wilding out with the sweat pouring, ‘til I woke up hoarse the next morning</i>
00:01:40	Jesse	Host	<i>[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue.]</i> Some DJs got their hands on the MP3s. Influential DJs, including one influential DJ who owned the entire website: Questlove of The Roots. Pretty soon, Little Brother had a deal for their first LP, <i>The Listening</i> . It was unique. It wasn’t really reflective of a regional scene. There barely was one where they lived. It wasn’t some particular aesthetic or genre. It wasn’t hard. It wasn’t self-consciously underground. It was two regular guys who happened to be great rappers and a producer with some incredible snare sounds.
00:02:20	Music	Music	<i>[Volume increases.]</i> <i>[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.]</i>

00:02:29	Jesse	Host	<p>And that regular Joe quality? It turned out to be a big deal. By indie label standards, <i>The Listening</i> was a huge hit. Critics loved it. Little Brother got a major label deal. But then that second record didn't sell enough. They got dropped. 9th Wonder left the group. Phonte and Big Pooh recorded as Little Brother a little more, but by the time the late teens rolled around, they hadn't even talked in years. But then, they got an offer for a big show, and they picked up the phone and they talked. And they talked. And then? Little Brother was back. Phonte and Pooh put out <i>May the Lord Watch</i> in 2019. They had been on quite a trip to end up back where they started. And frankly? They sounded happy to be there.</p> <p>They're releasing a documentary about their career later this year. They're touring right now. I was a regular on Okayplayer.com back when they first got started. I'm so excited to talk to them on Bullseye 20 years later. Before I get them on the line, let's listen to a track from <i>May the Lord Watch</i>. It's called "Black Magic (Make it Better)".</p>
00:03:41	Music	Music	<p>"Black Magic (Make it Better)" from the album <i>May the Lord Watch</i> by Little Brother.</p> <p><i>Alright, alright, alright</i> <i>Yeah!</i> <i>Alright, alright, alright</i></p> <p><i>Yeah, uh</i> <i>Black skin, Black faces, Black people make Black magic</i> <i>So, pay me every dime and also add taxes</i> <i>Cop a feel in a room full of brass tactics</i></p> <p><i>[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.]</i></p>
00:04:03	Jesse	Host	Phonte and Pooh, welcome to Bullseye. Welcome back to Bullseye. It's nice to talk to you.
00:04:07	Phonte	Guest	Man, thank you! Thank you for having us.
00:04:08	Big Pooh	Guest	Thank you, thank you.
00:04:10	Jesse	Host	You've achieved the longest spread between interviews by me— <i>[chuckling]</i> 'cause I think the first time I talked to you was like 2001 or something!
00:04:22	Phonte	Guest	Yeeeeeah!
			<i>[Pooh "wow"s.]</i>
00:04:28	Jesse	Host	Yeah, man. Yeah, this was early like Okayplayer days. Like. Yeah, you guys had a—it was like a big show opening for The Roots I think, in North Carolina. Like, down where you guys lived. You had your—it was like your first big show was coming out. You had a single on the internet, and it was 6:30 in the morning in Santa Cruz, California.
00:04:46	Phonte	Guest	Oh my god. What a time!
			<i>[They laugh.]</i>
			What a time.

00:04:53	Jesse	Host	When the two of you were growing up in North Carolina, were there other—were there people that you could look to like that person’s like me, and they’re a rap star?
00:05:04	Phonte	Guest	No. <i>[Laughs.]</i> Um, there was not. For us—well, for me growing up—I grew up in North Carolina. We always had people that were making music. But you know, it only went kind of to a certain level. So, like back in the days, this was like late ’80s, you know what I mean? In Greensborough, there was a record label called Payroll Records. And that was where you had like The Bizzie Boyz, who we now know as Ski Beatz. You know what I mean? That went on to produce for Jay and everybody. He certainly was a pioneer at that time.
00:05:41	Music	Music	“Droppin’ It” from the album <i>Droppin’ It</i> by The Bizzie Boyz. <i>Focus your full attention on every word that is expressed Uttered, announced, spoken or told Swallow it whole then let my science explode But still I’m classified as a sucker, so?</i> <i>[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.]</i>
00:05:51	Phonte	Guest	You had like all these guys that were making records, and it was local. But again, for me there was never a like, “Oh, they’re like me.” I always looked at them as like they’re older guys, like how in the hell do I get to do that someday? <i>[Chuckles.]</i> You know what I’m saying? But then, you know, you had—god, man, you had—who were the—? I can’t forget the ladies. You had N-Tyce in Deadly Venoms, who—she later went on to become this group, Deadly Venoms.
00:06:17	Music	Music	“Hush Hush Tip” from the album <i>Wild Pitch Classics</i> by N-Tyce. <i>If he doesn't know, how can it hurt? My mans should of known from the jump that I'm a chick, no nut work Why do you think I got the name N-Tyce? Why do you think all the fellas be looking twice?</i> <i>[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.]</i>
00:06:28	Phonte	Guest	<i>[Laughs.]</i> But yeah, these were kind of early North Carolina—you know—people that were—you know, artists that were like going for it. And you would hear like, okay, so-and-so got signed. And you might see a single, but then nothing would ever really like come from it. So, it was a lot of false starts. You know what I mean? So, when we came up at around our time, there was a group—Tyfu—I mean, me and Pooh would do shows with Tyfu. They were a huge crew out of Chapel Hill that is signed to—at the time, they were signed to Mammoth Records. And Tyfu had—god, <i>[inaudible]</i> Lovejoy, Taye, like those were like our peoples. And you know, they were super dope, and they signed to Mammoth, and then something happened with the label or something. But again, this is—by this time, this is like 2000/2001. Something like that. So, when we came in ’03 with <i>The Listening</i> , it was very much uncharted territory, and we had to map our own course.

00:07:24	Jesse	Host	Yeah, I guess the question for me is like—for me, growing up in the Bay Area, certainly there were big, national acts. Right? Hammer hit when I was ten or whatever. Right? Eight? I don't know. You know. Digital Underground and so forth. But like, if you listed all the people that like were from around that people listen to—it would be people with their own business going on, right? People who were inspired by Too Short and E-40 and so forth to like build a local business. And so, those people—like it was a gift and a curse, right? There was—it sort of was the end of people getting famous.
			<i>[They chuckle.]</i>
			Like nationally. But it was a lot of people making a living locally making music. And what I'm hearing you describe is the success stories ahead of you guys where people that managed to get a record deal and it didn't work out.
00:08:28	Pooh	Guest	Yeah. It wasn't—that's the thing about North Carolina. I grew up in Virginia, came down to North Carolina for college when I was 18. But just being here, it wasn't a thing of like in the Bay or in Texas or even Atlanta. And obviously, New York where they had scenes and it was an entire scene that unless you was there or went there, you had no idea about. And these people were successful on their own terms. North Carolina didn't have that. It was like the race to—the race to get signed by somebody, somewhere, no matter the level of label. It was just the race to get signed, and it wasn't a—I'll say a infrastructure or obviously not an industry. It wasn't any of that here, and it wasn't that hustle mentality like the Bay had. You know what I'm saying? It wasn't any of that. So, it was more so are you getting signed or aren't you?
00:09:23	Phonte	Guest	Yeah. And trying to figure that out, I think probably Petey—Petey Pablo, he was probably our first—you know—real kind of delegate in the sense of, you know, he actually signed a deal, signed to Jive. You know, had Timbaland—you know—doing his singles and stuff, doing his records.
00:09:38	Pooh	Guest	Big singles.
00:09:39	Phonte	Guest	Big singles, yeah. He was probably like really the first one to really plant that flag, in terms of seeing a local—not even a local artist, but just an artist from North Carolina go—you know—to that kind of heights. You know. That was the first time we'd really seen that.
00:09:53	Jesse	Host	Did you guys think that you were gonna become rap stars? Like you were gonna become Petey Pablo and be on 106 and Park, waving around your head like a helicopter?
			<i>[They chuckle.]</i>
00:10:03	Pooh	Guest	Not like that! I didn't—I didn't know what we would become. I thought it would be—as far the fame or the celebrity, I'll say I thought it would be more than what it was. But you know, that wasn't our course.
00:10:18	Jesse	Host	Was that the goal? Was the goal to make hit singles?
00:10:22	Phonte	Guest	Nah. I think the goal—you know, just speaking for me, I think the goal was just really just wanting to make something that we were proud of. That's—you know, that's always just in everything that I've done. You know, no matter what it is. If it's—you know, if it's LB, if it's Foreign Exchange, if it's <i>Sesame Street</i> , if it's anything. <i>Sherman Showcase</i> . Whatever. You know, I just wanna make something that I can stand on, because you can't control how

successful a thing can be. You can't control who's gonna like it. Who's gonna *[censored]* with it, whatever. You know. All you can control is that, hey, this is something I made, I'm proud of. And we put it out and we stand on it. You know what I mean?

00:10:58 Pooh Guest You control your part.
00:10:59 Phonte Guest Yeah, that's all we can control. So, for me that was what it was about. And when we signed to Atlantic and made *Minstrel Show*, I don't think the idea was hit records. I think the idea for me was just we have to show our original fanbase that we can still do us on a major label. You know, those 40/50,000 people, whoever who bought *The Listening*, we have to still show them that we're not gonna let a major label change Little Brother. And that was always the focus.

00:11:29 Jesse Host Stick around! More Bullseye around the corner from MaximumFun.org and NPR.
00:11:35 Music Transition Thumpy rock music.
00:11:39 Jesse Host It's Bullseye. I'm Jesse Thorn. If you're just joining us, we are talking with rappers Phonte and Big Pooh. Their group, Little Brother, influenced a generation of dorm room music makers. The two hadn't talked in years when they found themselves on the phone planning a new album. That reunion record is called *May the Lord Watch*. Let's get back to our conversation.

Now, hold on, because we're getting into you two being real grownups with a real career, and I wanna get back to the two of you as 19-year-olds in a dorm room or whatever.

[They chuckle.]

So, when you were 19-year-olds in a dorm room and you were rapping into a mic—you know—connected to—

00:12:22 Phonte Guest Church mic, yeah. Old—*[laughing]*.
00:12:25 Pooh Guest Carnival mic. *[Laugh.]*
00:12:26 Phonte Guest Yeah, they called it—yeah, we used to call it—yeah, yeah. Sounds like somebody on the tilt-o-whirl or something. We had real crappy equipment.

00:12:32 Jesse Host Rapping into Cool Edit or something on a computer.
00:12:35 Phonte Guest Absolutely. Yes.

[Jesse laughs.]

Our first album, *The Listening*, was done—was mixed, mastered—well, predominantly—it was mixed and recorded on Cool Edit Pro. Straight up.

00:12:45 Jesse Host *[Chuckles.]* Excellent. The \$20 program that became a \$300 program when Adobe bought it. But like, when you were rapping into a microphone connected to a desktop computer connected to a—you know—Twenty88 modem or whatever, was your idea we're gonna get signed and make major label hit records, or was your idea maybe we can tour?

00:13:10 Pooh Guest That's the thing. Like, I don't think we had the "we're gonna be stars and make hit records" dream. Well, at least I know I didn't, and obviously Phonte didn't. You know. Our thing was always just trying to make the best possible music we could make with whatever we had. And like I said, I thought *[chuckles]* you know, that we would be more—as far as the celebrity or the status, I thought there would

00:13:43 Phonte Guest
be more. I didn't think superstar, necessarily. I thought it would be bigger than what it was. But that wasn't the goal.
Yeah. And I'll also say too, a lot of that—to piggyback off what Pooh's saying—you know, that was really the only paradigm at that time that existed. You know what I mean? So, you know, we were kids from the '80s. So. And you know, I grew up as an '80s baby, so you know, back then who were the biggest kind of stars if you thought of Black musicianship or Black whatever? It was Prince, Michael Jackson. Right? Like that was pretty much the Black '80s. *[Chuckles.]* You know what I mean? So, when you're thinking of music and when you're thinking of careers—and for me, like thinking of, you know, rappers, it was just—you know, these kind of Mount Olympus kind of guys. You know, your Run-DMC, your LLs. You know what I mean? Just these kind of larger-than-life guys.

And that was the only kind of paradigm that we saw. We were coming in really early, so at 19—you know—this is, you know, 1998/'99. You know, this is pre-internet, really. Like, this is pre—you know, pre-social media. You know what I mean? So, it was either those are the only place you had to live—it was either you made something and it worked for radio and TV or it didn't. This whole middle ground? This kind of no man's land of the internet now, where anything can go? *[Chuckles.]*

00:14:58 Pooh Guest

It wasn't there.

00:14:59 Phonte Guest

It was not there at all.

00:15:01 Jesse Host

When the two of you and 9th Wonder, the original producer of the group, were hanging out—when you were 19 and 20 and 21 years old—what records were you nerding out over?

00:15:11 Phonte Guest

Um, man. It was anything JD—Dilla produced. So, like he really—for me—was very much like the north star. You know what I mean? And still is in a lot of ways. You know what I mean? I can't think of any song that I got stumped on and I thought like, "You know, what would Dilla do?" And it always makes the song better.

[They chuckle.]

You know what I mean? So, yeah. Anything Dilla, JD I could get my hands on. MF DOOM. Man! Any—the Soulquarians, they pretty much had me like in a headlock at that time. So. You know, Common, *Water for Chocolate*. You know, Slum, *Things Fall Apart*. Just anything in that lane. Black Star. Like all of that stuff. You know, it felt like—it spoke to me, you know, as an artist. And I was like yeah, I can do this. This feels authentic to who I am.

00:16:03 Jesse Host

Was that the same for you, Pooh?

00:16:05 Pooh Guest

Similar. I was actually getting introduced to a lot of music during that time. Radio, that's all I had in BMG. Shoutout to BMG for however many CDs for one cent.

[Phonte agrees with a laugh.]

But I was getting introduced to Dilla. I heard his music before, but I didn't know him or who he was. So, just I was getting introduced to these different groups and different types of music and things. So, for me, it was more of a exploration stage of my development and getting introduced—not just even to hip-hop, but just other—Phonte

introduced me to other genres of music. And you know, Beck. That's when I got turned on to Beck, when we was in college.

[Phonte confirms.]

00:16:49	Phonte	Guest	We actually had a show on our campus radio.
00:16:50	Pooh	Guest	AudioNet, son!
00:16:55	Jesse	Host	AudioNet! And we didn't play no rap. We didn't play no R&B. Was there a point where the three of you, as Little Brother, felt like oh, maybe this is a real thing?
00:17:04	Phonte	Guest	Oh yeah. Yeah. I think the moment that we realized that it was a real thing was when we recorded our first song, "Speed". You know. That was like the first song that we did together. And it was just like okay, like we got something here. Like we—there's something in this. You know what I mean? And we just decided to keep going. It was like, you know, this feels good. I think, you know, we got some good chemistry and we all decided just to keep going.
00:17:30	Pooh	Guest	Let's try—let's try a few more. <i>[Chuckles.]</i>
00:17:32	Phonte	Guest	Yeah, let's try a few more. And a few more turned into <i>The Listening</i> . And when <i>The Listening</i> was over, it was still—for me—just—you know, just listening to that album when it was done and just, you know, pulling up to my apartment at the time and just, you know, listening to it in the car. And I could tell that, you know, my life was gonna change. I didn't know how it was gonna change. I didn't know—you know, I wasn't thinking in terms of oh, I'm about to make all this money. I'm about to do this, that, and a third. I just knew that that was kind of the point of no return after hearing that album in its entirety and listening to what we had done.
00:18:05	Jesse	Host	Let's hear a bit of "Speed" from my guests', Little Brother's, debut album, <i>The Listening</i> , from 2003—released a little bit before that as a single.
00:18:14	Music	Music	"Speed" from the album <i>The Listening</i> by Little Brother. <i>It's from your crib to the lab to your job to make a profit And at the days end you still got nothing accomplished And it's just the way it's going down, but on the real, yo I think I need to slow it down, and slow it down</i> <i>This joint is going too fast for me Just too fast for me Just too fast for me Just too fast for me This really moving too fast for me Just too fast for me and you</i> <i>I try to slow it down like Brand Nubian</i> <i>[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.]</i>
00:18:42	Jesse	Host	I was playing that song on my music show on the radio in college off a burned CD. I burned an MP3 that I downloaded directly onto a CD and brought in a burned CD to the radio station. It was a very transitional time. And the internet turned out to be—now it's entirely normal. It's typical for—
00:19:05	Phonte	Guest	Mm-hm. It's standard.

00:19:06	Jesse	Host	—a rap star to have grown from an internet following. But the internet turned out to be completely transformational in your careers. How did that happen?
00:19:18	Pooh	Guest	Songs being put up that weren't intended to be put up.
			<i>[They laugh.]</i>
00:19:27	Phonte	Guest	Yeah, uh DJ Brainchild.
00:19:30	Pooh	Guest	Yeah, shoutout to him. Shoutout to the Brainchild.
			He was sent a few songs, just—you know, we were looking for an unbiased opinion on the songs. We thought they were good, and everybody around us thought they were good. And we trusted his judgement on music, just being on Okayplayer, on the boards and how he commented on different music. And—
00:19:48	Jesse	Host	Let's pause here for a second, Pooh, because you're saying this as though everyone understands what you're saying. What you're saying is DJ Brainchild was a friend of yours from a message board.
00:19:59	Pooh	Guest	From a message board.
00:20:00	Phonte	Guest	A message board, yeah.
00:20:01	Pooh	Guest	Which predated social media. It was the first social media.
			<i>[Phonte confirms.]</i>
00:20:05	Jesse	Host	Exactly. And so, had you ever met him in real life?
00:20:09	Phonte	Guest	No.
			<i>[Pooh confirms.]</i>
			Yeah, at that time I don't think we had met Brainchild. No, he was just someone that—you know—we just saw on Okayplayer that was, you know, this message board that just creative people from all disciplines, genres—writers, rappers, producers, like everything would just be there.
00:20:25	Jesse	Host	College radio hosts.
00:20:26	Phonte	Guest	College radio—you know what I mean? Come on! Let's not forget.
			<i>[Jesse laughs.]</i>
			Put some respect on it! <i>[Chuckles.]</i> So—but yeah, you have all these people. And so, Brainchild was just a guy that—you know, he would always talk about music and, you know, me and him would chop it up. And so, I think I sent him some records. And then, he ended up like putting them out like some—
00:20:44	Pooh	Guest	On his site. The John.
00:20:45	Phonte	Guest	On his site or whatever—John. It was the The John. And I was like, “Yo, what you doing? Like what are you talking about?” But not understanding, it's like, no, this is gonna open you up to more people. You know what I mean?
00:20:57	Jesse	Host	Did the three of you—the two of you and 9 th Wonder—were the three of you in Little Brother at the time on the same page? Like were you going for the same thing? Were you in the same place?
00:21:08	Phonte	Guest	Absolutely not! <i>[Laughs.]</i>
00:21:10	Pooh	Guest	No! I tell people all the time like when you start off together, like whatever configuration of your crew or group is, you do have one thing in common: you wanna make it.
00:21:23	Phonte	Guest	But “making it” looks different for every person. Yeah.

00:21:25	Pooh	Guest	“Making it” looks different to everybody. And that’s the conversation that no one ever has. <i>[Chuckles.]</i> It’s what does “making it” look like to you? What does it look like to you? You just know we wanna make it; we got the same goal. And that’s where things go off the rails quickly.
00:21:39	Phonte	Guest	Yeah. Nah, we were not on the same page at all. You know what I mean? And you know—and just at that time—I mean, you know, we’re in our 20s. You know what I’m saying? You know. 22 is—legally it’s an adult, you know what I’m saying? Like you can buy beer and cigarettes and like go to war and kill people, but you’re really not.
00:21:58	Pooh	Guest	You’re still a child.
00:21:59	Phonte	Guest	Yeah. In your mind. You know what I mean? You really shouldn’t be trusted with heavy decisions. <i>[Laughs.]</i> You know what I mean? It still requires a lot of—you know—adult supervision. You know what I mean? Or the supervision of someone that’s far more experienced in that area. And that was something that we really didn’t have. You know. It really was us just flying by the seat of our pants figuring it out as we went along. So, you know, I think us not having those early conversations, later on is—you know—what led to 9 th leaving and just—you know—the kind of animosity that we had back then. And just—you know, just everything getting crazy. But no one preps you for those things. You know? Like Pooh said, “making it”—you just wanna make it, but having those conversations and learning what making it looks like for each individual member—if you don’t have those first, you’re dead in the water.
00:22:51	Jesse	Host	What should you have talked about?
00:22:54	Pooh	Guest	What it looks like. Because this is the thing people don’t realize. Like, when you’re that young, you’re not only growing as an artist. More importantly for us, we were growing as men.
			<i>[Phonte agrees.]</i>
			We were learning how to be men. Learning how to be men and coming into manhood and learning who you are changes things for you. And so, those are the conversations. It’s a continuous conversation. It’s not just one. It’s continuous.
00:23:21	Phonte	Guest	Exactly, yeah. Nah, being—oh man, being in a group—yeah. It’s like a marriage. You know what I mean? It very much is like a marriage in the sense that it is—you know, what I say: it’s a living, breathing document. You know what I mean? It’s something that always is expanding, changing, and what was true on Monday—it may not be true on Tuesday or Wednesday. You know what I mean? So, definitely some of the early conversations that we should have had—you know, just—you know, touring. You know what I mean? It’s like, okay, do you like to tour? Do you wanna tour? What do you think about touring? How do you feel about recording? How—do you want to record the sessions or not? Do you wanna do it? Should we get someone else to do it? Anything!
			I mean, and these are things that like—it’s not even, you know—strange enough, it’s not even about money. You know what I’m saying? It’s not—it ain’t nothing to talk about money, ‘cause you ain’t making no damn money in the beginning. So. <i>[Chuckles.]</i> You know what I mean? So, it’s not even that you—you know, you had to talk about money, per se, it was just more so of just about just

logistics. Like how are all these pieces gonna fit together? If I know that you're not a morning person or if I know that, okay, this guy is more of a nighttime guy; he's probably not gonna wanna do early morning sessions. So, how do we work for that? If I know this guy's like, "Yeah, I know y'all like to tour, but like I ain't trying to tour at all. I hate that *[censored]*." Then, okay, we can have that conversation. Record deals! Do you want to sign to a major label?

[They chuckle.]

You know what I mean? Like, what does success look like for you? Is success for you a million records on Atlantic? Or is it, you know, 20,000 on an indie or whatever? You know what I mean? Those are just conversations that I think are—well, for us, were impossible at 22 years old. *[Laughs.]*

00:25:05 Pooh Guest
00:25:08 Phonte Guest

Yeah, we didn't—we didn't learn that until, you know...
The last few years.

[They laugh.]

00:25:14 Jesse Host
00:25:16 Phonte Guest
00:25:17 Pooh Guest
00:25:20 Phonte Guest

Right.
Are you glad you signed to a major label?
I am. I'm glad. Yeah. Yeah. I would say.
I am! The experience was priceless.
I think all artists—you should do it if no reason just then to demystify it. You know what I'm saying?

[Pooh agrees.]

Because you have this thing in your mind that you think is just gonna be the promised land, and it ain't that.

[Pooh confirms.]

00:25:32 Pooh Guest
00:25:34 Phonte Guest
00:25:37 Pooh Guest

Yeah, you know? So.
Jesus ain't waiting for you at the label.
Nah. You still—the work is still yours.
[Laughs.] It's still yours, so. Nah, it—I'm definitely glad. Like I said, the experience—as 'Te said, demystifying what a label is. And then, even some of the relationships that we still have from people that worked at the label.

00:25:49 Phonte Guest
00:25:51 Jesse Host

To this day.
I think it was a moment where a lot of big record labels had the idea that they could make a business out of what was then called underground rap. Right? MCA signed all these people. You know. And The Black Eyed Peas became giant hitmakers. But mostly it was rough going, because people were making records that were either bad versions of pop records or they were good versions of the records they made before that were bad for pop radio.

00:26:27 Phonte Guest
00:26:29 Jesse Host

Bad for pop radio, yeah. Facts.
So, how much perspective did you have when you signed that major label record deal about what you were supposed to do if you wanted to make money beyond that advance that you got?
Whatever it was.

00:26:45 Pooh Guest

[Beat.] Here's the thing about us. We didn't care.

[They laugh.]

I think that was part of our—you know—eventual doom at a label.

[Phonte giggles.]

We were very, uh, adamant about what we wanted to do and who we were and who we wanted to be. And we weren't gonna allow anybody to change us.

[Phonte agrees several times.]

And you know, our thing was y'all signed us because of what y'all heard and saw. So, allow us to be us! And get out the way!

[Laughs.] You know?

00:27:20 Phonte Guest

Straight up. Yeah. And they did! For the most part.

[Pooh confirms.]

I mean, they did! You know? So, that's why I never had any problems—you know, going through the Little Brother story, you know, the most—you know, the most alright thing about it is that it's really not a story of like this little, indie group versus the big, bad record label. Like, listen, we made the record we wanted to make. We put it out. They trusted us. They was like, "Alright. This what y'all wanna roll with? Cool." And you know, we put it out. And when it didn't work, they let us go! And it's just like, dude! I'm not mad at all. I got the experience. They didn't hold us up—you know, keep us hostage. Not, you know, holding us up in paperwork, in all that. Like, nah, it was just like, "Okay, guys. It didn't work. We think y'all are talented, but—you know, it's all good."

And so, you know, we didn't have any idea in terms of—you know—trying to make records for the radio specifically, because at that time what radio was, we just didn't fit into that. You know what I mean? At that time, that was like when the snap records was going off. You know what I mean? And so, that was kind of what the wave was at that time. And those records were fun, but we—trying to make a snap record or trying to make something that would fit into that kind of very specific box—you know, that just wasn't who we were. And like Pooh said, we just wanted to do us. So, signing to a major label, our mentality was, look, y'all signed us for us. And our fans have been rocking with us because we're us. So, we're just gonna keep doing us and let it fall how it's gonna fall.

00:28:54 Jesse Host

When we were 20 years old, there weren't any 40-year-old rappers.

[Phonte chuckles.]

And I wonder if having found that voice when you were 21 years old or whatever helped you understand what you could be rapping, as a real grownup?

00:29:12 Phonte Guest

Yeah. It definitely did. I think that's one of the key elements for me was just approaching—approaching our art as writers and not as rappers. You know what I'm saying? I think if you think of yourself as a 44-year-old rapper, then it's just kind of like oh my god. Like, you're the old guy in the club. But if you think of yourself as a 44-

year-old writer and one of the things that you write just happens to be raps, then that opens you up to a whole ‘nother way of thinking, because it’s like I can still write and tell my story. You know what I’m saying? But you know, I’m just writing and telling it. You know what I mean? And so, I’ve always said that hip-hop was kind of like—well, rap music in particular, but you know, rap was just always kind of like that guy that was just wilding in the streets. You know what I’m saying? As a teenager, and thought he’d be dead at like 20.

And now, he’s 40 and it’s like what in the hell? Like, I did not expect to make it this far. *[Chuckles.]* Not only did I not expect to make it this long, no one expected me to still be alive. You know what I mean? And so, now we’re at a point where you’re able to be—you know—a 40-year-old rapper. 40, 50, whatever. You’re able to be who you are at that age, because there are still people your age. They still want that music. You know what I’m saying? They’re still interested to hear their stories reflected in that way. And as long as you serve that audience and stay true to them, you can rap forever. You can do it as long as you feel like doing it. It’s not a—it’s not a physical sport. It’s not like basketball where it’s like, “Alright, bro, the knees are getting a little wobbly. You might wanna—you might wanna sit it down.”

You know, rap is—you know, it’s mental. You know what I mean? And as long as your brain is sharp and you keep—you know—enriching yourself, educating yourself, you can do it for as long as you want and just keep serving the audience that shows up for you. Pooh, did you still feel that way when you had other jobs five years ago?

00:31:08 Jesse Host

00:31:14 Pooh Guest

For me, it wasn’t—I think it was me really finding my way. Nothing to do with rap or how old I was or any of that. It was just more so me trying to figure out—still trying to figure out who I wanted to be, you know, within this industry. And I think that was the biggest thing for me is just finding—hey, look. I was in my 30s, but I was still growing. You know? I was still maturing and still understanding or coming to an understanding of who I was and, you know, who I am today. And that’s more so what that was for me was just—I call it the great recalibration in my life.

[Phonte chuckles.]

It’s just recalibrating. And I mean, even—you know—in my 40s, now, like there’s still moments where I have to recalibrate just to reset sort of. So, that’s more so what it was. I never bought into the whole “you can’t be a certain age and still rapping”. I always thought that was more marketing ploy than reality.

[Phonte chuckles and agrees.]

Because you turn—you see other genres and you see, you know, their artists allowed to grow within—you know, and the audience grows with them. And that didn’t—you know, it wasn’t always—Nah, hip-hop wasn’t afforded that same—that yaw.

00:32:31 Phonte Guest

00:32:33	Pooh	Guest	Yeah, it wasn't afforded that same luxury. So, I never really bought into that. But yeah. Five, six, seven—however many years ago it was for me, that was just a recalibration period.
00:32:44	Jesse	Host	We've got more to get into with Little Brother. Phonte and Pooh didn't speak for five years. So, what was it like to pick up the phone? Back in a minute. It's Bullseye, from MaximumFun.org and NPR.
00:33:01	Promo	Clip	Music: A vocalist skats an upbeat, acapella tune to serve as the instrumental.

John Hodgman: Where am I?

Elliott Kalan: On Maximum Fun.

John: What do you want?!

Elliott: A podcast miniseries about *The Prisoner*.

John: Who's side are you on?!

Elliott: That would be telling! But okay, I'm on my own side. It's one of my favorite ever TV shows. We want a podcast on it! A *Prisoner* podcast!

John: You won't get it!

Elliott: By hook or by crook, we will.

John: Who are you?!

Elliott: I'm Elliott Kalan.

John: Who is number one?

Elliott: Jesse Thorn. But you are John Hodgman.

John: I am not a *Prisoner* podcaster! I am a free man!

[Elliott cackles menacingly but crumples into a cough and then a laugh.]

John: Woah, you okay? Elliott, are you alright? Okay, I'll watch it!

00:33:45	Music	Transition
00:33:50	Jesse	Host

Elliott: All four episodes of *Be Podding You* are out now!

Chiming synth with a steady beat.

This is Bullseye. I'm Jesse Thorn. I'm talking with Phonte and Big Pooh of the rap group Little Brother.

The three original members of Little Brother—the two of you and 9th Wonder—have had a lot of starts and stops over the years. A lot of integrations and disintegrations. There were five years where the two of you didn't talk to each other. Were you not talking to each other or were you not speaking to each other? If that distinction makes sense.

00:34:24 Phonte Guest Yeah, nah, we weren't even speaking. Like, it was no—no communication at all. We weren't talking. Pooh and I, I think we didn't talk from like 2011 to like 2016.

00:34:38 Pooh Guest Yeah. I think that we sent like two emails.

00:34:40 Phonte Guest Yeah. It was like, you know, administrative stuff we had to do. And it was just like, "Hey, [censored]. Here's your money." You know what I mean?

[They laugh.]

00:34:48 Pooh Guest You know what I mean?
Yeah, that's essentially what it was. It was so professional.

[Phonte laughs.]

00:34:55 Phonte Guest It was like we never knew each other. That's what it looked like. Yeah. "Hello, Thomas. This is Phonte, here. And—" You know what I mean? Yeah, it was so—yeah, it wasn't us at all. But yeah. So, no, it was like five years we didn't talk. I think me and 9th, we didn't talk for like four or five years. Something like that. You know what I mean? Pooh and 9th didn't talk for some time. Yeah, I mean it was—it was a mess. You know what I mean? But you know, when I look back over our story, I think that that was what we needed. We all kind of had to go to our respective corners to just—I mean, yeah, just grow the [censored] up, really. You know what I mean? You know, it's very hard when you start something really young.

At that time, like—you know, Pooh was saying earlier like when you're still trying to figure out who you are. And it is very hard to figure out who you are in the context of something that's paying your rent. You know what I'm saying?

00:35:46 Pooh Guest And then, you're not just having to figure out who you are. You have to figure out who these other two people are, as well.

00:35:54 Phonte Guest That you thought you knew! You thought you knew so well!

00:35:56 Pooh Guest That you thought you knew, but you did not!

[Phonte cackles.]

[Laughing.] Hey, people don't understand how much that is. Right?

00:36:11 Phonte Guest And when you—and on top of that, not having a mentor—

00:36:13 Pooh Guest Nobody to walk you through that, yeah.

00:36:22 Jesse Host You know, not having guidance like to help you navigate these things, you end up like we ended up.

00:36:30 Pooh Guest When you weren't speaking, how sad were you? How mad were you? And how just checked out were you?

00:36:30 Pooh Guest I think for me it was more of a—it was more disappointment. I mean, there was some frustration, but I think it was more disappointment. And I said before, like you don't realize how integrated that other person was in your life until— The funny thing is it's not until they're gone—it's until you get them back in your life.

[Phonte chuckles knowingly.]

And then, you realize like damn! Yo, I was missing a lot! Because that disappointment, that frustration, that anger, whatever is blocking you from—

00:37:03	Phonte	Guest	—you from seeing the bigger picture.
00:37:04	Pooh	Guest	Seeing the bigger picture! But when that—so, like when me and ‘Te started talking again and, you know, rebuilding our relationship, that’s when I was really, really like damn. Like, I really missed him in my life. And you know, even people around me would say—they would say like, “Yeah, man. Yeah. You’re different now.”
00:37:26	Phonte	Guest	Yeah! Nah, nah, when—the realest compliment that I got on the album, when <i>May the Lord Watch</i> came out, we were doing a show in DC. And it just so happened, the same night Pharoahe Monch was doing a show at The Kennedy Center. And so, he was like the early show. Our show was a little later. So, I went over to—you know—his show. You know, showed love to him. And I ran into Styles P in the—he was like in the hallway. And you know, I hadn’t seen Styles in a minute. You know what I’m saying? I hadn’t seen P since we shot the Pharoahe Monch video a while back. But anyway, I saw him and first thing, he was like, “Yooo! That album, oh my god!”
			<i>[Music fades in.]</i>
00:38:15	Music	Music	He gave me a big hug. He was like, “Yo!” He said, “Yo, man. Y’all missed each other!” He said, “Yo, y’all sound like y’all missed each other.” And I was like yeah! We did! “Work Through Me” from the album <i>May the Lord Watch</i> by Little Brother. <i>Then get knocked down again 'cause somebody covet Material things that don't mean nothing Me and my brother used to dream that I would be something So when me and 'Te hit the stage, it ain't just for the accolades So sorry to aggravate, I just wanna be the man my mama and my grandma raised Literary bars that my grandma raised Crowds fall out like gamma rays When me and Pooh connect like Wonder Twins, activate</i>
00:38:36	Phonte	Guest	<i>[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.]</i> And so, just to get that from another just veteran—I mean, you’re talking about like a vet. Like you know, somebody that’s—you know, a dude that’s been through wars in this game. You know what I mean? And also, a member of a group who understands how hard it is to keep that going. You know, for him—for someone like that, of that stature to recognize—you know—that we rebuilt our brotherhood and we really did it for the right reasons, that to me was the biggest compliment that we received from the album. I’ll never forget that.
00:39:09	Jesse	Host	Well, Phonte, Pooh, thanks for coming on Bullseye. It’s nice to get to talk to you guys. It’s nice to see your faces.
00:39:14	Phonte	Guest	Good to see you as well, man! Good luck.
00:39:15	Pooh	Guest	Thank you, man. This has been—hey, look. It’s always a good time.
00:39:19	Phonte	Guest	Yeah, totally full-circle, man. Man, thank you for having us. This really means a lot.
00:39:23	Jesse	Host	Phonte and Big Pooh of Little Brother. They’ve got a documentary on the way. They are touring to celebrate the 20 th anniversary of

00:39:40 00:39:42	Music Jesse	Transition Host	<p>their debut album, <i>The Listening</i>. We'll have a link to the dates on our website. Just go to the Bullseye page at MaximumFun.org. Thumpy synth. 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. Here at my house in Lincoln Heights, I planted some trees out front and I was pretty sure that they were dead, because I must have planted them wrong or whatever. Anyway, all the leaves fell off pretty much right when I put them in the ground. I was very worried. But it turns out, nope! They're just deciduous trees! Now that it's almost springtime, they are budding full of flowers and new leaves right outside my window. And it turns out I don't kill everything I touch.</p> <p>Our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Congratulations to Kevin! He is on parental leave! He has obtained a child. We're so happy for Kevin and Kelly. Our producers are Jesus Ambrosio and Richard Robey. Our production fellows at Maximum Fun are Tabatha Myers and Bryanna Paz. We get help booking from Mara Davis. Our interstitial music is by DJW, also known as the great Dan Wally. Our theme song is by The Go! Team. It's called "Huddle Formation". Our thanks to them and to their label, Memphis Industries.</p> <p><i>Bullseye</i> is also on YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook. Find us in those places. Follow us. We will share with you all of our interviews. I think that's about it. Just remember: all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.</p>
00:41:09	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>