

[00:00:00] **Music:** Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.

[00:00:01] **Promo:** *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and is distributed by NPR.

[00:00:14] **Music:** “Huddle Formation” from the album *Thunder, Lightning, Strike* by The Go! Team—a fast, upbeat, peppy song. Music plays as Jesse speaks, then fades out.

[00:00:21] **Jesse Thorn:** It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. These days, the look is everywhere. But the next time you see someone in a designer logo, head to toe, know that Dapper Dan brought you that. When Louis Vuitton and Gucci were still scared of hip hop, Dapper Dan bought garment bags at boutiques, sliced them up and made them into snorkel coats.

He printed up his own Vuitton canvas and made bucket hats and trousers. Anyone who was anyone on the streets of Harlem knew Dapper Dan's was the place for the most outrageous and extravagant styles. If you can picture LL Cool J or Rakim in 1987, you're probably picturing something Dapper Dan made.

Back in the day, the labels took him to court to shut him down. Now, they bring him to their offices and ask him to collaborate. In fact, a few years ago, Gucci ran a knockoff of a classic Dapper Dan design down their runway. 35 or 40 years later, those fashion businesses want that special thing, and that's the thing that Dapper Dan has always had.

I was thrilled to get to talk to a for real fashion legend. And needless to say, when he showed up for the recording, his outfit did not disappoint.

[00:01:46] **Music:** Bouncy, upbeat synth.

[00:01:52] **Jesse Thorn:** Alright, Dap. Welcome to *Bullseye*. It's nice to have you on the show.

[00:01:55] **Dapper Dan:** Oh, thank you for having me, man. I'm excited about this. All new experiences take me to another level. So, thanks guys for having me.

[00:02:03] **Jesse Thorn:** I gotta tell you, usually when I do one of these interviews, I'm the one who has outdressed the guest. Today, I'm just wearing a crewneck sweatshirt.

*(They laugh.)*

And you are absolutely suited and booted. You're in New York. I can see you through a webcam. Can you tell me what you're wearing today?

[00:02:22] **Dapper Dan:** *(Fabric rustling.)* Oh, today I'm wearing snakeskin pants, Gucci snakeskin pants. I'm wearing boots by Puma. And my vest is by Dapper Dan. My blazer—my leather blazer's by Dapper Dan. My ascot is by Dapper Dan. I have a Gucci belt on.

[00:02:42] **Jesse Thorn:** Now we're talking. You look like a million dollars. Tell me about the first piece of clothing that you remember having in your childhood. The first one that sticks out.

[00:02:52] **Dapper Dan:** In my life, in my entire life from—?

[00:02:54] **Jesse Thorn:** Yeah. When you were a kid.

[00:02:56] **Dapper Dan:** Jeans. Wrangler jeans. The reason Wrangler jeans was important is because—it would be two, actually. Wrangler jeans and khakis, but Wrangler jeans as a brand name would stick out the most. The reason Wrangler jeans was so important is because we used to do the hambone. You know, the hambone is?

[00:03:16] **Jesse Thorn:** No, sir.

[00:03:17] **Dapper Dan:** The hambone is like—when the slaves—(*clapping rhythmically*).

[00:03:21] **Jesse Thorn:** Are you talking about like body music?

[00:03:24] **Dapper Dan:** That's it. That's it. The—(*demonstrates again, faster this time*).

And the reason why we used jeans, the Wrangler jeans, back then? Because of the heavy weight and the sound that it made. So, we all used to wear Wrangler jeans when we'd, you know, sit on the stoop or go somewhere, a G.O.. You know, like the school, G.O., I would perform and things like that. So, the hambone, the hambone was very, very big when I was a kid.

[00:03:56] **Jesse Thorn:** I like the idea of all these uptown kids going to the clothing store and asking for cowboy cut.

[00:04:02] **Dapper Dan:** Yeah, cowboy cut jeans. Yeah.

[00:04:06] **Jesse Thorn:** You mentioned one more as well.

[00:04:07] **Dapper Dan:** Khakis. We got new khakis every year. The—NYCHA, New York City Housing Authority, used to give boat rides for the poor kids in Harlem. At that time, the pier—which has reopened—but the pier on Westin and 125th Street, they had a boat that used to come there. And we would all—it would take us and our families—you know, the poor families—up to Bear Mountain for a day for a festival. And we'd have a track and things like that and a picnic area. And my parents would get me brand new khakis every year.

It had to have the—like the little buckle in the back, you know? So, I remember that, because I can associate that with good times. I can associate the Wrangler jeans with good times.

[00:04:52] **Jesse Thorn:** Did you always have clean clothes in good shape?

[00:04:55] **Dapper Dan:** Always had hand-me-down clothes. I have six siblings, three brothers that are older than me and three sisters that are younger than me. What that means is that Goodwills was our Macy's, and all the clothes that we got that I received were hand-me-downs from my oldest brother to the next, to the next 'til it got to me. I'm number four in line. By the time they got to me, they wasn't in great shape, but they sufficed.

[00:05:25] **Jesse Thorn:** You didn't go straight into the fashion business?

[00:05:28] **Dapper Dan:** No, no, I didn't. I went straight into fashion consciousness, but not fashion business.

[00:05:35] **Jesse Thorn:** When you went into fashion consciousness, what are we talking about? Mid-'60s?

[00:05:39] **Dapper Dan:** No. You know, there's no way for a person to understand my trajectory without me explaining like clothes, which would maybe go into the fashion. I realized early on with the shoes and later on with a suit that my father was gonna buy, how transformative it is to have nice clothes and be on 125th Street.

Well, 125th Street used to be like 42nd Street. And people—nobody knew how poor I was or how I lived. So, I was—it transformed me. I was another person. You know, nobody knew I had rats and roaches and holes in the wall and things like that. So, that's what was the catalyst for me going into the fashion business. Right? And that's what happened later on. But my primary goal is to transform myself through fashion, through clothes. I didn't even have the concept of fashion. I had this concept of like, "I want to be part of that which makes people better than the way I was."

[00:06:39] **Jesse Thorn:** You were mostly making money on the street as a gambler when you were a young man?

[00:06:44] **Dapper Dan:** Yes. That's the first really street talent that I developed early on.

[00:06:50] **Jesse Thorn:** How'd you get there? How'd you learn?

[00:06:51] **Dapper Dan:** My uncle was a professional gambler, and he was amazing. They wouldn't even let him gamble in the gambler circles. He was amazing. He was Eddie Hendry. He was nicknamed Fishman Eddie. He was amazing and well known in Harlem.

And then I had older brothers and cousins and everything. Gambling—street gambling was big, so I learned early on. So, when you look at it, like each of us was separated by two years, and why that was so important is I had all my friends; I had all my brother's friends of each category, so I learned a whole lot, going all the way up to my uncles and my cousin. And gambling was a big thing. You have to understand the culture. Before Harlem fell victim to the drug trade, it was gambling that sustained the underground economy. That was the policy business, you know, the number business. It didn't—later on it changed into the drug business.

So, it was gambling—Harlem was a gamblers time, a gamblers community. Alright? And so, I learned that all there.

[00:07:56] **Jesse Thorn:** What are we talking about? Cards or dice or what?

[00:07:59] **Dapper Dan:** Both. My popularity of becoming Dapper Dan is a result of my skills at gambling. Well, I learned everything about gambling that you could. I exhausted all the information that was in the street associated with gambling, and then when was nobody else to teach me anything else, 'cause I had mastered all the teachers that taught me about gambling, including my uncle, Fisherman Eddie.

I sought out books, and the books that I read were *Scarne on Cards* and *Scarne on Craps*. Scarne was the foremost authority to the United States government on casino gambling and everything. He's the—even to this day, I don't think anybody has put out as much information from a grassroots rubble to a professional level than Scarne.

[00:08:47] **Jesse Thorn:** So, my dad one time told me that he made his living money when he was in college playing poker. Until one day he was playing in a game, and there happened to be one of the linemen from the Berkeley football team—the Cal football team was in the game, and my dad took his money, until the lineman hung him out a window by his ankles for a while, at which time my dad returned the man's money that he had won.

[00:09:15] **Dapper Dan:** Oh, of course.

*(They chuckle.)*

That makes sense.

[00:09:19] **Jesse Thorn:** Yeah. So, I guess my question is: if you're street gambling—you know, if you're in a casino, it's one thing. You're making the money. There's cameras everywhere. There's casino laws and cops, and if you win the money, you win the money. And the best they can do is keep you from coming in next time.

If you're gambling on the street, that person that lost, they have to give up their money. So, besides winning, how did you keep yourself from losing the money or losing your health and life?

[00:09:56] **Dapper Dan:** *(Laughs.)* I take it that if that guy put your dad out the window, maybe your dad wasn't doing something that wasn't all together fair.

*(They laugh.)*

[00:10:06] **Jesse Thorn:** I think he just won!

[00:10:08] **Dapper Dan:** To your knowledge, he won. You know? But, uh, we call that a crap fit, you know? Or gambler's fit. Some people can't stand or lose, and they might—I

haven't seen many of them, you know, because in Harlem, everybody's connected to somebody. You know. And your strength lies in the power of the group.

So, I had three older brothers, two older cousins, a number of uncles. So, I'm not the guy that if I win your money, you would think about taking the money back. So, I came from a strong, powerful foundation. They wouldn't want the repercussion that would come from them—anybody asking me for the money back.

[00:10:50] **Jesse Thorn:** You mentioned that the underground economy of Harlem changed from gambling to drugs. That happened when you were a young man, or started to happen when you were a young man. And it changed the course of your life.

*(Dan confirms.)*

How did you start dealing and how did you start using?

[00:11:09] **Dapper Dan:** It slipped in on us. It kind of like—it happens like taking a shower. You can get in the shower, have the water on neutral, and then slowly turn it hot. And you don't even—you don't realize that the temperature that it has reached, you would never get into it like that. You know? You had to do it gradually.

So, it started like my friend and I, they had this, these older guys who also taught me the drug business. My friend and I, Curtis, we took \$2.50 a piece, bought a \$5 bag of reefer, and we rolled it up, and we got like 20 joints out of it. And we took that, and then got four bags, and we kept until we got like up to a half a pound, and then he had no patience, so we sold that.

The drug business caught me because the biggest drug clique in Harlem was in my neighborhood. You heard of Nicky Barnes, right?

*(Jesse confirms.)*

The infamous Nicky Barnes. He's the biggest thing since Bumpy Johnson.

[00:12:11] **Jesse Thorn:** Yeah. Famous Harlem gangster.

[00:12:12] **Dapper Dan:** Nicky Barnes is the one who told on John Gotti's brother, Gene Gotti, who just got home last year as a result of that.

So, I come from that community, from that neighborhood. They all know me. They all know my family, right? Nicky Barnes revolutionized the drug game. He had what was called Mom and Pop Mills. Mills, where he had family people—the Bronx, Manhattan, all over—scattered all over, packaging up drugs. So, my friends, one of my best friends' family was part of them, those mills. And what happened was, unbeknownst to his family, he was taking drugs, sneaking drugs out and bringing them down to me, 'cause he looked up to me. And I would give them to my older brother. My older brother would sell them and give us the

money. And that was my initiation into the game in the beginning, and it just escalated from there.

However, what I didn't realize—we had first started inhaling it, or what they call sniffing heroin. I didn't even know I had a habit; you know? That's how it happens. I didn't even know I had a habit until he stopped stealing it, you know, and there was no more available. That's—and then I couldn't understand why I was getting these headaches and stomachaches and everything.

And fortunately for me, that period in my life lasted 15 months. Which today, all my friends says is amazing. I walked away from that life, went back to high school, and then went to prep school, then went to Iona College, then went to Africa. I just made a complete transformation.

[00:13:50] **Jesse Thorn:** So, were you able to get clean just from the mere fact that, you know, the connection dried up, that it wasn't passing through you anymore?

[00:13:58] **Dapper Dan:** No. What inspired me is the guy who taught me and my brothers all about—after the second stage of the drug dealing, the guy who taught us was a guy named John Stanton, from inner Harlem. And he's the one who taught us. So, when we got arrested, they arrested me and all my brothers together. They took us to the precinct, and they had us in the bullpen, right?

And one by one, they called us out of the bullpen, and then took us back into the bullpen. So, I'm the youngest brother. So, I asked my brother, I said, "They called me out there, but they didn't, um—they didn't ask me nothing. They just brought me back in."

And my brother told me, he said, "Did you hear that knock on the door?"

I said, "Yeah, I did hear something."

He said, "That's the person—the snitch, who's telling on you behind that two-way mirror on that door."

I ended up getting probation after being—you know, going back and forth to court, you know, while I was incarcerated. I ended up getting probation from that. And I told my brothers, I said, "That was too easy. And, um, I'm never going back together to jail again for drugs." Number one, I don't like what it did to the community or to me. You know? And number two is that I saw how evil and antisocial, how it could just tear friendships apart. 'Cause this guy, we looked up to this guy. So, when I got out—right?—I got on the spiritual path, started reading a lot of spiritual stuff.

But I was also on a revolutionary path. One of the first books I read was Malcolm X's speeches, and in which he had a speech called "Malcolm X Speaks to the Grassroots". And when I read that speech, the part that resonated with me so much, Malcolm said, "If you wanna understand the flower, study the seed." And I read books like I always do. Like, I read Scarne. I read books on how the drug epidemic started and where they came from. And I read

about the Opium Wars, the Boxer Rebellion in China, and I wrote about it while I was in prep school. Because while in prep school, I was writing for a radical newspaper called *40 Acres and a Mule*. And in that paper we all identified those problems that was having negative effects on the community.

So that's how I elevated myself to understanding like, sometimes you have a problem, and you think it's just you, but that problem is really larger than you. And if you study the nature of that problem, you can solve it. But a lot of people get lost in thinking, "That's just me." But it's connected to something bigger than them that, if they could find out exactly where it came from, then they can defeat it. And that's what I did.

[00:16:47] **Jesse Thorn:** We'll be back in just a second. It's *Bullseye* from [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and NPR.

[00:16:53] **Music:** Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

[00:16:57] **Jesse Thorn:** This is *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is fashion designer and haberdasher Dapper Dan. He's worked with brands like Gucci, Gap, and most recently, Puma.

You mentioned that going to Africa was important to you. How did you end up on the airplane?

[00:17:15] **Dapper Dan:** Okay. So, here's the story, right? It's in the '60s, you know, that's probably—in my lifetime, it's the most radical period that I've experienced in terms of Black liberation and everything of that nature, right? So, I'm writing for this student newspaper, *40 Acres and a Mule*. We had people from Random House coming to teach us how to write. We had people from Columbia University coming to teach us. We had various organizations sending people to come teach us how to write, you know, to guide us how to formulate our own newspaper.

They noticed that I had a really exceptional ability for my age at the time. So, Columbia offered me an internship leading to a scholarship for the school of journalism. Right? At that time, there was a lot of money floating—coming into the community, because we had few Black journalists. Earl Caldwell, one of the exceptional Black journalists at the time, was my hero. So, it was this thing—it was this push to get more Black journalists. So, Columbia University was going to let me into the undergraduate school with the hope of me becoming a journalist. Right?

But at the same time, at the newspaper, *40 Acres and a Mule*, we had Black scholars coming through. And one of the Black scholars that came through was Dr. Henrik Clarke, and this is the probably one of the most profound experiences that changed my whole life. In the '60s, everybody was reacting with anger. I was an angry young man. And one of the students asked Dr. Henrik Clarke, he says, "If we, the Black people, are the original people on the planet, why are we going through what we're going through?"

And Dr. Henrik Clarke says, "That's because of transgression that we made against ourselves before Europeans came into our life."

That threw me.

Now, a young—I'm a young Black man. I'm 21 now. I'm mad at slavery, and here's a renowned Black professor telling me that slavery is not the cause of what happened. It's the effect. From that moment on, I said I needed to find out, just like I had to find out about where drugs came from, I had to find out the, the real source of slavery in America. So, I turned down the opportunity to go to that internship program to Columbia and accepted another program that they were offering to write at the newspaper to go and do a living in Africa and visit seven different countries. And the things I learned while I was there, brought to light because—Dr. Henrik Clarke never elaborated. He just said it was a transgression that we made against ourself. But when I got there, it all came to light exactly what he was talking about, exactly what (*inaudible*).

[00:20:16] **Jesse Thorn:** What did you know about Africa before you left?

[00:20:19] **Dapper Dan:** Oh, all I knew was about the slave trade, you know? But you gotta remember, our first lap of the trip was Ghana. That's 1968. Ghana got its independence in 19—I think it was 1957. So, by the time I got to Africa, these was all new nations, new African nations were developing. Prior to that, I just had read like, Lerone Bennett, *Up from Slavery*. I read books basically focused on slavery. That's why I didn't know about those things that transpired before slavery. Do you understand?

[00:20:52] **Jesse Thorn:** Or in some ways after, right? I mean like your understanding of Africa is about that certain time when the slave trade interacted with America, and you're showing up in a place where people are like, “Yeah, no, I'm Ghanaian. I live here and now. We're trying to build a country. We're anti-colonialist. But also, like I'm just another 23-year-old guy who lives in a totally different place from you.”

[00:21:19] **Dapper Dan:** No, a 23-year-old in Ghana had a—at that time, had a higher level of political consciousness than a 21-year-old in—

[00:21:28] **Jesse Thorn:** Because they necessarily had to be engaged in the project of creating a country, basically.

[00:21:34] **Dapper Dan:** Nation building. That's the difference. We were all in the process of like liberation, liberating ourselves—consciously and community-wise, trying to take charge. We were trying to take charge of our community. And I'm going to a place where they are nation-conscious. You know? And really politically conscious.

So, one of the places that I stayed in Tanzania, I stayed at Corniche International School, where they were training South Africans to go back and fight in Rhodesia, in South Africa, for liberation. So, I was in Ghana right after they disposed of Kwame Nkrumah, who was part of the Pan-Africanism movement. I was in Kenya, when Jomo Kenyatta was still president. I was—uh, the first founding father. I was in Tanzania when Nyerere was president, you know?



So, we touched out in Lagos, Nigeria when they was having the war. We couldn't even get off the plane. One of the—one of the things that I sort of—was like so politically shaken was they told the Afrikaans that, who were on the plane on their way to South Africa to go back to their homeland. The Afrikaans, the one that was controlling South Africa, they told them, “If you get off this plane, you will be arrested.” So, we was awakened to a whole lot of things on a higher political level.

[00:22:56] **Jesse Thorn:** What was it like when you got home? You had had this experience and you're back in the place you're from.

[00:23:03] **Dapper Dan:** Uh, I was seeing it with a different light. I was—I have never been the same since then. Oddly enough, it made me understand America more than I did before, and it made me understand what it means to be an African American more than before. One of the things that I was taken aback of, I asked a guy in Ghana when I first arrived—that was the first lap of our trip—I asked him does he think about the fact that he's Black every day?

And he looked at me like, “I never think about that.” He says, “I never think about that.” You know? They think about whether they are Twi, Fon, Asante. You know? But they never think about the fact that they're Black. And then, when I got back, I realized that when I'm going to the subway, when I'm going to the store, whenever I encounter somebody of European descent, I'm conscious of my Blackness in some way, either completely conscious or subconscious. And it made me realize the effect that it had on me and what my thought process—what I needed to do to change. And, um—do you understand that?

[00:24:12] **Jesse Thorn:** Absolutely. I was thinking about how being a hustler, and particularly a gambler, and running a clothing store, making clothes, were connected. And two things occurred to me—and tell me if I'm off-base here. One is when you're gambling, you have to be able to talk enough to keep people in the game, right? You have to—you know, if you're in a casino, you can just be a guy who counts cards and, you know, knows how to beat blackjack—beat the house in blackjack or whatever. Or you know, enter a poker tournament. You just have to beat everybody by knowing when to hold them and when to fold them or whatever.

If you're in a street game, part of your goal is to keep people who are losing money engaged enough that they don't leave, that they continue to lose money. And that seems like—that kind of—maintaining that connection seems like it directly, you know, is salesmanship.

*(Dan agrees.)*

The other piece of it is that you have to know the territory, as a salesman would say. When you're a gambler, you have to know what's safe, what isn't, who's connected to whom, in what way. You know, you have to know what's going on in the neighborhood.

And that also was central to your business, when you got into clothes: knowing who was who, what was what, who was connected to who how, what was safe, what wasn't. That was essential to you selling furs and, later, your own designs. Did you think of your work running the store when you first got a store in that way? Like did you think about how your prior life had prepared you?

[00:25:55] **Dapper Dan:** Oh, absolutely. It's the key to everything. And that key is—and I say this in some of my speeches. Before you build the brand, you must build the man. My personality and my ability to interact with people in my community stood out. You know? And has been the cornerstone to what I did in the street as well as to what I did in fashion.

You know? Like even when I was gambling, when I'd break a guy, we'd go eat! We'd go to party, we'd go dance. You know? One of the key things about me when I was—I was Dapper Dan before I opened Dapper Dan. I was flying sharp after—you know, as developing my skills in gambling and buying clothes. So, I transformed that same energy, because I was sharp, into my ability to sell clothes. You know, guys say, (*gruffly*) “Oh, yeah man, I'm fly. I'm fly like Dapper Dan, or I can get fly-er than Dapper Dan.” So, it's like developing a personality and a character who I became and who I am has always been essential to my success.

[00:27:03] **Jesse Thorn:** When did you first hire tailors?

[00:27:05] **Dapper Dan:** I went to Africa in '73—back to Africa in '73. I opened up my store in '82, probably. '83, '84.

[00:27:17] **Jesse Thorn:** Why did you do it?

[00:27:18] **Dapper Dan:** Once again, I was buying furs as I—you know, (*inaudible*) we couldn't handle the volume I was getting. So, I was buying furs from a chain store, from a guy whose brother owned a chain store in Alexander's department stores. Right? It was Fred the furrier, you know, popular furrier back in the day. He had all the fur salons in Alexander's stores, which was popular back then. But he had a brother who had a place in New Jersey called the Fur Factory. So now I'm buying furs from him wholesale, you know, and I would pay like maybe maximum \$1200, and minimum I would make on the fur was \$1000, minimum. And upwards from that. Right?

So, I'm doing good business with him. So, he tells me, he says, “Look, my nephew and my son are starting this company, right? And the name of the company they're starting, these young guys is Andrew and Mark.” Which later became, and they're still around today, Andrew Marc, right?

So, he said, “They're gonna be selling leather and stuff.” So, I started buying leather jackets from them. And they had this popular jacket that I was buying from Andrew Marc's, you know, and it had leather outside a possum lining. And my competition in Harlem, these guys who used to own like five stores, but they had the number one store in Harlem, called AJ Lester's.

So, they too were buying from Andrew Marc. And, one day I go down to Andrew Marc and these, I mean, we had a great relationship. They had this young Black female there who was friends of mine. She even started off telling me how cool these guys—“These guys is really cool.”

And when I got down, they said, “Dan, we got a problem.” I said, what's the problem? He says, “I can't sell you the jackets no more.” I said, what do you mean you can't sell me—? He says, “The guy who's your competition, who owns the AJ Lester's? They found out that—how much you was selling the jackets for.” So, I was wholesale—I was getting the jackets wholesale for \$400, selling 'em for \$800.

AJ Lester was selling them for \$1200, and they got upset. And they went to Andrew Marc and told them, you know, “If you sell to Dapper Dan, I'm not buying from you anymore.” So, Andrew Marc, they was real cool.

He said, “Man, we could—we could sell to you, you know? But we gotta take the label out.”

And I said, “Take the label out?!” So, I got upset and I left. I realized the situation, and I got out. But as a result of me being in Africa—and in Africa, I had tailors make me clothes over there. I said, you know what? I'm gonna give me some African tailors here, and I'm gonna make them same jackets that they would sell to me. That was the beginning of me going from finished garments to custom, 100% custom.

[00:30:18] **Jesse Thorn:** When did you start cutting up luggage and making it into clothes?

[00:30:22] **Dapper Dan:** That only lasted maybe eight months.

[00:30:26] **Jesse Thorn:** Well, there's only so many garment bags you can buy, right?

[00:30:29] **Dapper Dan:** And the nature of the material. You know, I'm trying to do luxury garments. You know, trying to make a garment with vinyl, you have everybody walking around like Tinman from the *Wizard of Oz*, you know?

[00:30:41] **Jesse Thorn:** Especially that kind of vinyl that gets made into a garment bag or made into luggage that's built to be durable. Right?

[00:30:47] **Dapper Dan:** Exactly. So, I had to do what I've always done.

[00:30:50] **Jesse Thorn:** You started out—we should say, you started out going to boutiques to buy what at the time was the main kind of logoed, high-fashion textile, which was the leather and vinyl that had—that was made into luggage, especially garment bags, which had big, flat pieces.

[00:31:08] **Dapper Dan:** Yes, yes. But I was going to the actual Gucci stores and between the stores getting—basically, Gucci stores and Louis Vuitton stores—and using it, but it wasn't suitable for garments, you know? So, I said, you know what? I'm gonna have to do what I always did. I have to teach myself textile printing. And then I went back to—back to my library stage and began to teach myself everything there is that I needed to know to be able to print that material on leather and on cloth.

And that's what—after that, everything just took off from there.

[00:31:46] **Jesse Thorn:** Tell me about a piece that you made or designed early on in that period that you were really excited about, that you were really proud of.

[00:31:55] **Dapper Dan:** The most exciting piece? The snorkel. It was the snorkel, which people ask for today. Everybody is associated—because of a cult following of a movie called *Paid in Full*. You know, because of that movie and because of the gangsters that owned it, it was the top item that you can get if you were part of street culture. You know?

[00:32:17] **Jesse Thorn:** This is like a hooded jacket.

[00:32:19] **Dapper Dan:** It's a snorkel, exactly like a snorkel. It was a snorkel, but it was all—I made it all Louis Vuitton with fox collar. You know, we had thick, very thick lining in it. You know, it was every bit of a snorkel, you know, that was the number one. Everybody wanted that. If you were a top guy, if you were a boss, that's what you wanted.

[00:32:41] **Jesse Thorn:** Did somebody come in and ask for it, or did you tell somebody, “Let's make a snorkel jacket out of—out of this Vuitton fabric.”

[00:32:48] **Dapper Dan:** Oh, no. I knew that the snorkel was popular. Period. So, I said, “Why don't I just make gum a Louis Vuitton snorkel?” So that's how that evolved.

[00:32:59] **Jesse Thorn:** We've got much more to get into with the fashion designer Dapper Dan, stay with us. It's *Bullseye* from [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and NPR.

[00:33:08] **Promo:**

**Music:** Fun, upbeat, brassy music.

**Mallory O'Meara:** Hey, let us guess. You love books, but wish you had more time to read.

**Brea Grant:** Or maybe you used to read a lot, but life has gotten in the way. Kids, grad school, you name it.

**Mallory:** Maybe you don't know where to start, and bookish social media is overwhelming.

*(Music cuts out suddenly.)*

How do people on TikTok read so many books?!

**Brea:** Oh my God, I don't know!

*(Music resumes.)*

And maybe even reading the same book for six months, and now it's permanently attached to your bedside table.

**Mallory:** Maybe you don't even know what you like to read anymore.

**Brea:** We're *Reading Glasses*, and don't worry. We got you. We'll get you back into reading and help you enjoy books again. *Reading Glasses*, every week on Maximum Fun.

*(Music fades out.)*

[00:33:50] **Music:** Bright, chiming synth with a syncopated beat.

[00:33:55] **Jesse Thorn:** Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. If you're just joining us, my guest is Dapper Dan. He's a legendary fashion designer who bridged the gap between luxury fashion and hip hop. He's created garments for rappers like Big Daddy Kane, Salt-N-Pepa, and KRS-One. Dap is also the recipient of the Council of Fashion Designers of America Geoffrey Beene Lifetime Achievement Award. Let's get back into our conversation.

When you're making custom clothes, I imagine that a lot of the people who were buying from you had money and they probably had money from the street. Did you have to think about how to position yourself in that world, even though you're just a guy running a clothing store?

[00:34:39] **Dapper Dan:** I wasn't just a guy running the clothing store. I was a guy from the corner who walked away from the corner that was hip as hell, popular as hell, knew every kind of hustle game from the streets, who was highly regarded in the streets. That's the guy who opened up the store, not the typical guy. Alright?

And that worked for a while, until the streets changed. The transformation of inner-city neighborhoods one by one expanded with the subculture of drugs—expanded economically, and then imploded. And once it implodes, that's when the violence—and it's like watching a pack of wolves turn on each other. And then, when there's no wolf to turn on, they look around for anything they can find.

So, I became a victim of that transformation, you know. And you might hear me saying some (*inaudible*) speeches after that. What I learned from that experience, because they tried to kidnap me, but my street training resisted that.

[00:35:47] **Jesse Thorn:** You're talking about from your store?

[00:35:49] **Dapper Dan:** From my store.

[00:35:50] **Jesse Thorn:** Kidnapped for ransom or for the money or—?

[00:35:52] **Dapper Dan:** If I would've let him take me, it would've been a ransom thing. But possibly they'd have killed me because my connection to the street is like—was too strong.

How could they let me live and I have so much street support, you know? So anyway, but I resisted and got shot. I've been walking around with a bullet in my neck since then, at the base of my neck. But, uh, yeah. So, even those most familiar and skilled with what street life is about could fall victim.

And it's what I always say. You cannot be in it and not of it, regardless. So, I was totally against the drug trade. I was totally against all the things that were going on, and I was slowly transforming and getting more spiritual as I went on. But still, I was in that environment, you know? And I felt—and I used this—I felt like Lot's wife.

You know, you gotta—you gotta leave. You gotta leave. You can't be in it, you know? Symbolism of turning into stone as you look back, you gotta get out of that. You gotta get away from it. And that's why I talk about that in some of my speeches. You cannot be in it and not of it, just cause the—whatever's befalling the people who are there, sooner or later it'll happen to you.

[00:37:07] **Jesse Thorn:** I mean, one of the challenges that you were facing in the mid to late '80s is you're making clothes for people who are street famous. And when people who are famous-famous start wearing your clothes—you know, rappers on album covers and stuff in the late '80s—on the one hand, that's great for business. On the other hand, that's real conspicuous in a way that people wearing them on the corner in Harlem wasn't to the brands whose logos you were using—whose designs you were using.

Were you thinking about that sort of double-edged sword that like your work was getting really famous, and also that attention might lead somebody to come after you legally?

[00:38:00] **Dapper Dan:** Oh yes, absolutely. But at a certain point, yeah, as you just stated—you know, when you get too popular, like when Mike Tyson had the fight in my store. Oh yeah, then it reached international levels, like—well, but it wasn't so much—it was a combination of things. Right? Number one, when I started out and I was making these garments by these brands, I was making things that definitely they weren't making.

So, it wasn't a threat on that level. It was just a threat that I'm, you know—if anything it was like a—well, minor problem, because he's not interfering with our business even though we don't want him doing that. It wasn't like they needed to come at me for that. But what changed that whole scenario was the elevation of rap music.

You know, so the celebrities started coming, because my customers became celebrities. They didn't start out celebrities. Fortunately for me, I—at the time I was opening my store, a new musical genre was happening. And my store and my business grew along with it. You know, just as I developed a new identity for myself, I developed a new identity for artists in a new musical genre, you know?

And then from there it spread to, you know, sports stars and other people who are famous.

[00:39:20] **Jesse Thorn:** But I mean, it was well into the '90s when these luxury brands realized that they could make money in this culture rather than being afraid that being involved in this culture would alienate the rich old people that bought luxury clothes. And so, the late '80s, these companies were still very much operating from a—you know—reactionary, racist place of, “If these people wear our logos, they're ruining our prestige.”

*(Dan agrees.)*

And so, when your clothes got famous, their reaction stopped being, “Well, this doesn't affect our marketplace at all,” and started being, “Well, we better do something about this.”

[00:40:12] **Dapper Dan:** I'll tell you, probably the catalyst for all of what you're saying has more to do with the music. When young European boys started getting attracted to rap music, you don't stop with just the music, you stop with the whole image. You know? You want—you want the whole image, man. So, when you see guys like crossing over from—I mean, the rappers was like, Ralph Lauren gave them one horse.

I gave them a whole herd, you know? And so, the young European boys are seeing this, and this is exciting, and the rap music is exciting. So, they start crossing over. And so, that is really like what made a profound difference. You know, it was crossing over. It was like European luxury had fallen to the point where it wasn't evolving culturally, and it was too old school. It was too old boy, you know? And even like—in one of the books, like *Culture* or *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, you know, when you look at the Teddy Boys, in England and you look at the influence that the Beatles had and Mick Jagger and them had, it really started with them.

It was just that. You can see in the Beatles and Mick Jagger them, you can see influence that swings back to the jazz era, all the way back to the Zoot suits, you know? So, it's always been that stamp there. It's just that we've never been able to expand on it, you know what I mean? And so, when I started out, it just had reached a new level.

So now, (*stammers*) we have not only a musical genre that young, European boys are gravitating towards. Now, we have a dress style that we can produce that they was gravitating towards. That was the difference.

[00:42:06] **Jesse Thorn:** When you started getting sued in the late '80s, early '90s, when they really started coming after you, what did you lose?

[00:42:13] **Dapper Dan:** I lost—okay. Look, I started from one tailor. And I end up with 23 tailors. I started off with maybe like a 300 square foot store, and then I had a 2000 square foot store and a three-story building, as well as the 2000 square foot factory. Alright? I had 12 African tailors in the day, 11 at night. I was open 24 hours a day, 365 days, for 10 years straight.

So that's how big it had become. And when I got raided each time, 'cause you know, each brand, every time they raided me, they took all the—anything with their name on it. They took my machines. When you're talking 23 people, you—and you're talking like the top-of-the-line JUKI sewing machines, it was expensive.

You know, very expensive for me to rebuild each time. And each time, I came back until it forced me underground. And once I went underground, I just stayed underground until—I don't know how you would say it, until I discovered Gucci or Gucci discovered me.

(*They laugh.*)

[00:43:26] **Jesse Thorn:** Yeah, there was what might loosely be called an homage—or somewhere on the continuum between homage and rip-off—of one of your designs in a runway show that kind of exploded on social media, ‘cause people pointed out the original design and the runway design. I’m sure you knew at that point the influence that what you had brought to the game had. I mean, you could see it right in front of your nose, not just on the streets, but in every magazine or, you know, on *Rap City* or whatever. Right? And you were deeply connected to the garment business still, I’m sure. But were you connected to the fashion business?

[00:44:07] **Dapper Dan:** I had absolutely no connection to the fashion business. We were two separate entities. I never interacted with them, period. I didn’t even go to a trade show until I got into the—the first trade show I ever went to was as a result of my partnership with Gucci. I didn’t wanna know what the finished garment looked like.

I didn’t want any part of the structure part of the fashion industry, because I wanted to create a whole separate reality from what that was. You know? And so, I’d never been to there. My only interaction was like I would go to the trade shows that I would go to, not to see garments. The trade shows that I would go to was to see the latest technology associated with garment building.

So that’s all I ever went to was like trade shows with the latest technology. You know? One of the amazing things is like if you are a person of color, like an African American like me, and you go to a trade show and you see a machine and you see what that machine is designed to do, you don’t see yourself doing that. You see the potential that that has in creating something from your lifestyle. So that was the most fascinating part of the whole creative process: to look at something and see what I could do with that, you know, as opposed to what it was created to do.

[00:45:36] **Jesse Thorn:** Were you happy and comfortable right away to be folded into the fashion world?

[00:45:41] **Dapper Dan:** I mean, there’s nothing more I like doing. My passion is studying religion and philosophy, then writing, history, and fashion, or ballroom dancing after that. Those are my passions.

[00:46:01] **Jesse Thorn:** Yeah, if you say ballroom dancing, you’re talking about like foxtrots and cha-chas and stuff?

[00:46:06] **Dapper Dan:** No, no, uh, like what we call Afro-Cuban music. We started off and—I like dancing what you’d call today—what we called it growing up was Afro-Cuban jazz that we dance with, but it’s actually Southside dancing, bachata, merengue, all those things where you hold a woman. I ain’t for like—these new young guys, they on one side of the room, woman on the other side of the room, woman standing on the wall. She’s shaking her butt. The guy over there, he just popping his finger. No, I’m—(*chuckles.*) I’m on a different level, man. You know what I’m saying? No.

[00:46:35] **Jesse Thorn:** It’s you and Eddie Palmieri and some girl.



[00:46:36] **Dapper Dan:** Oh, that's right. Eddie Palmieri, that's right. Yeah. Eddie Palmieri, El Cugat, Combo. Man, you know, the greats! You know? Yeah. I'm on that.

[00:46:47] **Jesse Thorn:** Well, Dap, I sure appreciate your time. Thank you for—thank you for being on the show.

[00:46:50] **Dapper Dan:** Thank you for having me. Alright.

[00:46:53] **Jesse Thorn:** Dapper Dan, the Harlem legend, an honor to have him on the program. Besides his clothes, he also has a memoir. It's called *Made in Harlem*.

[00:46:02] **Music:** Relaxed, brassy music.

[00:46:04] **Jesse Thorn:** That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye*, created from the homes of me and the staff of Maximum Fun in and around greater Los Angeles, California—where, here on my block, a giant branch from a eucalyptus tree fell from, you know, the sidewalk, the curb, into my neighbor's yard yesterday. It was blocking the whole walkway, and somehow it was pointed the wrong way—like the broken off part was pointing towards his house, and the not broken off part was pointing the opposite way towards the curb and the street. And I don't know how that's possible. It was a huge branch. Like what turned it around? Did it pirouette in the sky like a high diver? Our world is full of mysteries.

Our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producers, Jesus Ambrosio and Richard Robey. Our production fellow at Maximum Fun is Bryanna Paz.

We get booking help from Mara Davis. Special thanks to our friend Dylan Higgins for editing that Dapper Dan interview. Our interstitial music is composed and provided to us by DJW, also known as Dan Wally. Our theme song is by The Go! Team. It is called “Huddle Formation”. Thanks to them and to their label, Memphis Industries.

*Bullseye* 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 it. Just remember, all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

[00:48:39] **Promo:** *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.

*(Music fades out.)*