

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

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

[00:00:13] **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.

[00:00:16] **Jesse Thorn:** It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. Look, who doesn't love Kool & the Gang?! Go to a wedding! Everybody loves Kool & the Gang. I mean, we're talking about some of the greatest party songs of all time. “Get Down on It”, “Celebration”, “Ladies’ Night”. But we're also talking about a lot more than dance floor fillers. After all, the first version of Kool & the Gang wasn't even called Kool & the Gang. They were called The Jazziacs. My guest, Kool—Robert Bell—started the group with his brother Ronald and some of their friends from high school.

They were playing jazz, but not just jazz. They did everything else. They backed everyone who came through town. They played instrumental covers of Motown records. They played James Brown songs, and they realized that if they were going to do all of these things—well, they probably shouldn't be called The Jazziacs. They didn't really have a singer, a front man, but Robert had the best nickname. So, they put that up front: Kool & the Gang. And by the time they started recording in 1968, Kool & the Gang were one of the baddest bands in the country.

[00:01:28] **Music:** “Chocolate Buttermilk” from the album *Kool & the Gang* by Kool & the Gang.

*(Music continues under the dialogue then fades out.)*

[00:01:50] **Jesse Thorn:** On those early albums, Kool & the Gang were genre benders. They were still almost all instrumental, but they were a little too funky to be soul jazz, a little too jazzy to be funk. They didn't have the hooks to make radio hits, but they were too danceable for jazz clubs. The music, though? The music was heavy.

[00:02:11] **Music:** “Soul Vibrations” from the album *Music is the Message* by Kool & the Gang.

*This is the soul vibration*

*(The band laughs and greets each other excitedly.)*

*This is the best party I've been to in years!*

*What do y'all call this thing here?*

*Soul vibration, man!*

*Soul vibration! I see all my friends here*

*They're vibing, man*

*(Music continues under the dialogue then fades out.)*

[00:02:42] **Jesse Thorn:** By the time 1973 rolled around, they'd added vocals, gotten funkier and started making hits—"Hollywood Swinging", "Funky Stuff", and this one, which you've probably heard.

[00:02:55] **Music:** "Jungle Boogie" from the album *Wild and Peaceful* by Kool & the Gang.

*Jungle boogie (Get down with the boogie)*

*Jungle boogie (Get it on)*

*Jungle boogie (Get down with the boogie)*

*Jungle boogie (A-get it on)*

*Jungle boogie (Get up a-with the boogie)*

*Jungle boogie (Get up a-with the get down)*

*(Music continues under the dialogue then fades out.)*

[00:03:14] **Jesse Thorn:** It wasn't their first reinvention. As funk gave way to disco, Kool & the Gang made some of the biggest hits, not just of their careers, but of all time. The ones you've danced to at weddings, "Celebration" and "Cherish" and "Get Down on It". The ones that play between innings at baseball games and over the PA at the grocery store, the ones grandmas and grandchildren and everyone in between will be listening to for decades to come.

There has now been more than half a century of Kool & the Gang, and they're still at it. On July 14th, they released their newest record, *People Just Wanna Have Fun*. Before we get into my interview with Robert Bell—Kool himself—let's take a listen to a song from the new album. It's called "Let's Party".

[00:04:02] **Music:** "Let's Party" from the album *People Just Wanna Have Fun* by Kool & the Gang.

*Dance like you've never danced before*

*Put your hands up, up to the roof*

*DJ turn it up in 3, 2, 1*

*Let's party, let's party, let's party, oh*

*Let's party...*

*(Music continues under the dialogue then fades out.)*

[00:04:23] **Jesse Thorn:** Robert “Kool” Bell, I'm so happy to have you on the program. Welcome to *Bullseye*.

[00:04:28] **Robert Bell:** Well, thanks for having me!

[00:04:30] **Jesse Thorn:** So, I read that you gave yourself the nickname. Is that true?

[00:04:36] **Robert Bell:** Yes, that's kind of true. Yeah.

[00:04:38] **Jesse Thorn:** You're not supposed to be allowed to give yourself nicknames, especially cool ones like Kool! (*Chuckles.*)

[00:04:45] **Robert Bell:** Well, it was a situation there. I was born in Youngstown, Ohio. I left Youngstown—my family and I—in 1960 to Jersey City. And in the neighborhood, there was guys who had different sort of street names and whatever, and I caught myself trying to fit in. So, it was this guy who called himself Cool. He spelled it with C. And I said, “Well, I like that name. I'm gonna take that on as a nickname. I'm gonna spell mine with a K.”

[00:05:25] **Jesse Thorn:** How old were you when you moved to Jersey City?

[00:05:29] **Robert Bell:** Uh, well, I went to Jersey when I was 10 years old, but this was around '64, when the band started. I was around 14 years old.

[00:05:39] **Jesse Thorn:** That feels like not just a big move geographically, but a tough move at that time in your life—right?—like when you're an adolescent, you're already trying to figure out who you are in the world. And to move across the country at that same time seems rough.

[00:05:58] **Robert Bell:** Yeah, it was kind of a rough time. My family was having some problems in terms of my mother—my father was a top five featherweight, and he was never home, like I ended up being on the road, myself. And so, my mother—my mother, uh—aunt came to Youngstown, and she saw how we were living. That was her sister. She said, “You need—I need to get you out of here.” And everything that we owned was in the back of this station wagon with her husband. That's how we ended up in Jersey. And I guess you'd call that destiny, because had I never left Youngstown, had I never went to Jersey, there would never have been a Kool & the Gang.

[00:06:46] **Jesse Thorn:** Did you watch your father fight when he was a fighter?

[00:06:49] **Robert Bell:** I saw maybe once or twice. I was so young—eight, nine years old. But there are some films of what he fought. I found out later—only, shoot, about a year ago! He had 52 fights. You know. So, I'm going to try to get some of those fights that he did, 'cause I didn't get a chance to see that. Yeah, because he wasn't around.

[00:07:17] **Jesse Thorn:** Yeah, I feel like. Being able to tell your friend, “My dad's a professional boxer,” is exciting, but it's also lonely to miss him when he's off in Cuba fighting or whatever. And it's also scary to think that your dad gets hit in the head for a living.

[00:07:39] **Robert Bell:** Yeah, it's a rough gig. (*Chuckles.*) He had wanted me to box in the—you call it like the mini league, up in Elmar, New York, at the Neighborhood House. And I boxed one time, and this guy was like twice my size. And I said, “No, this is not for me.”

[00:08:05] **Jesse Thorn:** (*Chuckles.*) I had a friend—I had a friend in high school who was an amateur boxer, and he told me one time I was like how can you do that? Like, I understand being able to punch somebody, but I don't understand being able to get punched. And he's like, “Well, it only hurts the first time.” And I was like I don't know if that's true. (*Laughing.*) That doesn't seem right to me! Seems like it would hurt the whole time.

[00:08:31] **Robert Bell:** But I think with my father, he boxed in Cuba a lot before the sanctions. And people like Miles Davis and Dizzy Gillespie and a lot of different jazz musicians was playing down in Havana, in Cuba. So, when I was born, my father told my mother—'cause uh, my father's name was Robert Bell. They called him Bobby Bell. And they were going to—he said, “Yeah, he could be Bobby Junior or Bobby Bell, Jr. But I got another name for him!”

And so, she said, “What?”

“I wanna call him Dodo Marmarosa El Rey Kiko.” A Cuban name. And now Dodo Marmarosa was a keyboard player and a bass player. My father didn't know what I was gonna be, so I never liked the name when I was growing up in Youngstown, 'cause people would not say the full name. They would stop at Dodo. I said, “Why in the hell did my father name me Dodo?” But it was Dodo Marmarosa. And I'm trying to figure that—and he didn't know I was gonna become a bass player.

[00:09:44] **Jesse Thorn:** You didn't know you were gonna become a bass player, right? It's not like you were taking piano lessons.

[00:09:50] **Robert Bell:** No, no, no. Actually, I was told that my grandfather was a mechanic. He used to have me under the car with him when I was like two years old. (*Chuckles.*) When I was eight, I built my own motorbike from a lawnmower motor. I took a lawnmower motor and put it on a bicycle frame and ride around Youngstown, you know? And I used to slow it down by choking the carburetor when it got close to the corner. Now if someone came right in front of me, I didn't have no brakes like that! (*Laughs.*) And so, I didn't know that I was just gonna become, you know, into the music business.

We started off, my brother and I, used to take these empty paint cans, and depending on how much paint is left in the can was the tone of the can. And we used to sit on this place, it was called The Immaculate. It was the Catholic high school, and it was like a little hill that went to the valley. We'd just sit on there and beat them paint cans, you know. And then finally, we moved to Ohio—from Ohio, rather, I should say—to Jersey. Ended up—my mother bought me some bongos and bought my brother a conga. And that's how we started. Then, he went on to playing the saxophone, and I went on playing the bass.

[00:11:09] **Jesse Thorn:** When did the two of you make a band?

[00:11:14] **Robert Bell:** That was in 1964.

[00:11:16] **Jesse Thorn:** So, you were 14 years old. This is like buddies of yours from school?

[00:11:21] **Robert Bell:** Yeah. Yeah. The first name that we call ourself was The Jazziacs. Of course, because of, you know—you know, like D.T. Dennis Thomas. I was into Cannonball Adderley, my brother John Coltrane. I listened to Ron Carter. George listened to Philly Joe Jones. And etc., etc. So, we called ourself The Jazziacs.

[00:11:45] **Jesse Thorn:** When you were thinking of yourself as a jazz man, were you playing shows in jazz clubs locally?

[00:11:52] **Robert Bell:** No. More R&B clubs. Uh, you know, we played a little jazz at the club, but at the club we would do a little jazz, a little Motown. We played a lot of James Brown, you know, *Cold Sweat*, “There Was a Time”, yeah.

[00:12:12] **Jesse Thorn:** What were the acts you were backing on The Soul Town Review?

[00:12:16] **Robert Bell:** The acts?

[00:12:17] **Jesse Thorn:** Yeah, what was going on? What was the—what was the review?

[00:12:21] **Robert Bell:** Local talent that was trying to be Temptations or Smokey Robinson or some young ladies was trying to be like the Supremes. And of course, guy sounded like James Brown. Those were the acts. No stars at that time.

[00:12:37] **Jesse Thorn:** So, you kind of had to be ready for anything when you're up on stage the whole show, and you got six local yahoos running through the stage. Some good, some less. You gotta be ready to make the show work.

[00:12:54] **Robert Bell:** Yeah. Yeah. We gotta know the song. The thing about that, we had to learn these songs. And that's, uh, Jamerson—

[00:13:03] **Jesse Thorn:** James Jamerson, the bassist from so many of the Motown records.

[00:13:07] **Robert Bell:** Yeah. Right, right, right. So, I listened to him, because I had to listen to what the baselines could be for the songs that we were playing.

[00:13:17] **Jesse Thorn:** Did you think when you were playing backup on The Soul Town Review that you were gonna grow up and be a studio band or be a band that toured behind, you know, Otis Redding or whatever?

[00:13:32] **Robert Bell:** Well, we didn't know really what we were gonna be, in terms of backing up this local talent. We knew that was something that we were doing, and we liked what we were doing and learning from that music. But also, in the club we would play behind them, and then we would do our thing. And our thing was the Kool & the Gang thing. Taking like "Since I Lost My Baby", somebody's singing it, we do an instrumental version. Or some of the other stuff—which was on our first album that came out—we did a instrumental version of "Since I Lost My Baby". And so, we were growing, and then when we left The Soul Town Review, we were Kool & the Flames, and we played a lot of James Brown during that time and some other artists, even Sly & the Family Stone at the time. So, we were Kool & the Flames.

And then, when we did our first album with Mr. Gene Redd, we became Kool & the Gang. We had songs like "Sea of Tranquility", "Chocolate Buttermilk". Excuse me. "Raw Hamburgers". All that was "Breeze and Soul". That was all our music. And that took us from—and *Kool & the Gang*, our very first record, it was top 40. And that was all instrumental. People thought it was a Spanish band, and we was all happy just getting out of high school. "Yeah. You hear my record? Yeah. (*Sings a few bars.*)"

You know, so—(*chuckles*) you know, so that lead us to being Kool & the Gang, not backing up any groups anymore. We just—we had established our own sound.

(*Music fades in.*)

[00:15:15] **Jesse Thorn:** Let's hear some music from that Kool & the Gang self-titled debut album. How about a little bit of "Give it Up"?

[00:15:23] **Music:** "Give it Up" from the album *Kool & the Gang* by Kool & the Gang. A fun, brassy R&B track.

(*Music continues under the dialogue then fades out.*)

[00:15:50] **Jesse Thorn:** It's a great record, great album. Were any of you singing in your shows?

[00:15:56] **Robert Bell:** Not during that time. And you know what? I think that's why a lot of the hip hop artists was sampling our music, because there was no singer in the way. It was just the group.

[00:16:15] **Jesse Thorn:** Even more with Robert “Kool” Bell to come. Where do those hits come from? “Ladies’ Night”, “Summer Madness”. Bell tells us when we get back. It's *Bullseye* from [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and NPR.

[00:16:31] **Promo:**

**Music:** Bright, hopeful music.

**Cameron Esposito:** Hey, Max Fun listeners. This is Cameron Esposito. I'm a standup comic actor, writer, bestselling author, and podcaster. I got a great show, called *Queery*, where I interview LGBTQ+ luminaries across, oh, a bunch of fields. People in entertainment, astronauts, musicians, rock stars. I am bringing the show to Maximum Fun. You can listen right now. And I am so happy to be on this network. We have new episodes out every Monday. You can listen at [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) or wherever you get your podcasts.

*(Music fades out.)*

[00:17:10] **Music:** Thumpy rock music.

[00:17:15] **Jesse Thorn:** Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. If you're just joining us, my guest is Robert Bell. He's a founding member of Kool & the Gang. They're behind some of the biggest tracks of all time, songs like “Celebration”, “Hollywood Swinging”, and “Get Down on It”. I mean, I could keep going for quite some time, or we could get back into my interview with Robert Bell. So, let's do that.

How'd you figure out how to put on a show? Because if you don't have a singer up on stage, it's extra hard. You know? There's no focus points. So, what did you do to keep that crowd with you?

[00:17:52] **Robert Bell:** Well, we had to hit a Kool & the Gang. And we got our first Kool & the Gang gig at the Apollo Theater, in New York. And in New York, there was this group called (*struggling to remember*) Jimmy Vista & the Mighty—Skip, Sonny & the Mighty Magnificents. And they had the band, and they had four singers. And they came out. They was swinging their horn and dancing and doing all that. They ran us back to Jersey City! We said, “Now in order to compete, we got put something together to compete with that!” We didn't start singing at that time, but we started putting the show together, and we started doing routines with the songs that we were playing.

Now, we covered a couple songs, like “Since I Lost My Baby” and other tracks, but we were doing—we were doing all the routines of the R&B groups at that time, but we weren't singing at that time. But we moved on to our own style of singing when we did “Funky Man” and we did “Funky Granny”, and we started developing, uh, Kool & the Gang's sound. And then we—Monique recorded “Hollywood Swinging”, “Jungle Boogie”, and “Funky Stuff”. It was our style of singing. “Hollywood Swinging” was top 10, I believe, on R&B. No, on R&B was number one, but on top pop chart, “Jungle Boogie” was in top five. It was our style.

[00:19:36] **Jesse Thorn:** Were you guys worried about it being corny to put on an R&B show when you were jazz musicians or boring to have solos and long grooves when you were trying to put on an R&B review?

[00:19:52] **Robert Bell:** Well, we were to some degree, because of, you know, playing back in Jersey City and being influenced by, you know, the various jazz artists that I mentioned. You know, Freddie Hubbard or Herbie Hancock, etc., etc., but we also knew that if we wanted to be in show business, we had to create. We couldn't just stand up and play like a jazz musician. We had to move on.

[00:20:20] **Jesse Thorn:** Let's hear some music from— Both your second and third Kool & the Gang records—bold gambit, by the way—are live albums. You're like, “Well, we put out the one album. Here comes back-to-back live records. But they're both really fantastic records. And *Live at the PJ's* is one of my all-time faves. So, let's hear “N.T.” from that record, which is—“N.T.” stands for no titles? No title?

*(Music fades in.)*

[00:20:45] **Robert Bell:** That's what we called it. ‘Cause we didn't know what to call it. So, I said, “Just call it no title!”

[00:20:50] **Music:** “N.T.” from the album *Live at PJ's* by Kool & the Gang. An up-tempo, brassy number.

*(Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.)*

[00:21:07] **Jesse Thorn:** Listening to that record, like there's those two kind of opening horn phrases. And the second one—(*mimics the horn*) that one comes in like just a half a moment late. And it is the funkier—like it is not square. It just comes in—just holds you for a second. (*Mimics the horn.*) And it jams so hard.

*(They laugh.)*

[00:21:35] **Robert Bell:** Well, you know, “N.T.” was sampled by a lot of hip-hop artists. Most of them sampled the drums. They took the drum beat and created, you know, their songs. You know. “N.T.”

[00:21:51] **Jesse Thorn:** Got those big, open sounds. I mean, that's what—when you're making a hip-hop record, you're looking for those sounds that you can—that you can use as building blocks.

[00:21:59] **Robert Bell:** Right, right. Yeah. “N.T.” was one of them. Yeah.

[00:22:03] **Jesse Thorn:** Well, let's talk for a second about “Funky Granny”, because you brought it up. This a record from your album *Music is the Message*, 1972, and it's the last song on the album, if I remember right. It is the goofiest song, but it also jams pretty hard.



And I feel like by the time this record comes out—fourth album, second studio record—you guys must have been pretty comfortable with yourselves to put out a record with a silly voice on it. You know what I mean? (*Chuckles.*)

(*He laughs and agrees.*)

Like, you had to kind of know who you were to get to that.

[00:22:50] **Robert Bell:** Yeah, we kinda did silly things. I mean, you know, “Funky Granny” came after “Funky Man”. We did “Funky Man” first. “Watch out, here comes the funky man! We going to funk the whole world up!” Radio wasn't playing, ‘cause they thought we said the other word! (*Laughs.*) So “Funky Man”, then came “Funky Granny”.

[00:23:10] **Jesse Thorn:** Well, let's hear a little bit of it.

[00:23:11] **Music:** “Funky Granny” from the album *Music is the Message* by Kool & the Gang.

*Hey, hey there, fellas! How y'all doing? Yeah!*

*Hey there, what's your name, old lady?*

*My name is Funky Granny!*

*Funky Granny?!*

*That's right, son! What's wrong with you?*

(*Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.*)

[00:23:27] **Jesse Thorn:** Whose granny voice is that?

[00:23:29] **Robert Bell:** That's my brother. You know, Ronald Bell, he passed about—almost two years ago. But yeah, that's how we have fun. You know, “Funky Man”. He's also the voice on “Funky Man”, also “Funky Granny”.

[00:23:45] **Jesse Thorn:** How did you guys get comfortable—if not quite singing, then at the very least, putting vocals on record?

[00:23:56] **Robert Bell:** Well, those were (*inaudible*) vocals for us. You know, we'd come up with an idea, and we'd just throw it on there. You know, because we weren't doing any sort of lead singing. It's more like it was group singing. You know, like “Funky Man” or “Funky Granny”, those songs. And at that point, we still didn't do a lot of singing. It was, again, “Hollywood Swinging”. Ricky West, our keyboard player at that time. And then, “Jungle Boogie” was more of chance, but you know, it's one of our most sampled records too. And

then “Funky Stuff” was just straight up. “Can't get enough that funky stuff.” Group singing. We didn't have any lead singing, as you know, until later on.

[00:24:46] **Jesse Thorn:** That record with “Funky Stuff” and “Hollywood Swinging” and so forth, *Wild and Peaceful*, really changed your career. Not that your previous records hadn't been successful. They were. But it was the one that had capital H Hits on it. I mean, those were big hits. How did that change your life?

[00:25:09] **Robert Bell:** Well, it definitely changed our direction a little bit. What happened with those three records and that album—the record company came to us, and they said, “Listen, you know, you guys are having territorial hits. You know, they know you in Philadelphia, Connecticut, you know, maybe Virginia and Jersey and Philly.” He said, “But there's this record out that's huge, called “Soul Makossa”, by Mongo Diobango or Dibango. There's this producer that produced that record.” And he said, “I'd like for you guys to meet with this producer, and maybe he can come up with a big hit for you.”

So, we met with him once. And we said, “Uh, no, we're not really feeling him.”

So, we went into a studio in New York, called Bag East, down in the Soho district. And we went in there at eight o'clock in the morning, and we jammed. By midnight, we had created “Fucking Stuff”, “Jungle Boogie”, and “Hollywood Swinging”. No more problems from the record company, after that! He's talking about huge records. (*Chuckles.*)

[00:26:28] **Jesse Thorn:** Did you know that you had made huge records when you cut them?

[00:26:32] **Robert Bell:** We felt good about it! ‘Cause some of the songs were kinda like what we did, you know. If you're looking at “Funky Stuff”—the bass drums, the grooves were sort of similar. They were—it was not as busy as like say “Funky Granny” or some of the other songs. But—and then “Hollywood Swinging” was the thing about everybody—well, most people, I'll put it that way, like to go to Hollywood. So did we. So, we said, “Well, let's write a song about it.” And I remember our first time in Hollywood.

(*Music fades in.*)

We drove across country from New Jersey all the way out to LA, saw the big Hollywood signs. Oh, wow. And we created that song, “Hollywood Swinging”.

[00:27:12] **Music:** “Hollywood Swinging” from the album *Wild and Peaceful* by Kool & the Gang.

*Hey, hey, hey*

*What you got to say?*

*Say hey, hey, hey*

*What you got to say?*

*Hollywood*

*Hollywood swinging*

*(Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.)*

[00:27:37] **Robert Bell:** And we didn't know that that song was going to become such a large hit as well, "Hollywood Swinging".

[00:27:42] **Jesse Thorn:** Music was changing really fast around you. I mean, even just in the world of funk, things were very different in 1972 and 1973 than they had been in 1969 and 1970.

*(Robert agrees.)*

I mean, you know, James Brown was coming to the end of his run as the king. Like, he had created funk—or he and the JBs had created funk, and that was kind of slowing down. And you know, the Parliament Funkadelic and the Ohio Players and you guys were all finding lanes there in that world. But you know, you guys have constantly been trying to figure out how to articulate who you were in the world, because you have always been a jazz band and a funk band and a pop band all at once.

[00:28:39] **Robert Bell:** Yeah. The next album after that was *Light of Worlds*. And "Summer Madness" came from that. Spike Mickens, one of the original members, had a song called "You Don't Have to Change", and the vamp on "You Don't Have to Change"—my brother listened to that one night, and he was in the studio. He said, "You know what? That's another song." He had just got his Op synthesizer. And he said, "I'm gonna do something with that."

And the next day we came in the studio, he took a solo over the vamp. And Spike, who wrote "You Don't Have to Change", we asked him, "How you like that?"

*(Music fades in.)*

He said, "I like it."

"What do you wanna call it, Spike?"

"I don't know."

"Let's call it Summer Madness." And that's how it happened.

[00:29:37] **Jesse Thorn:** Let's hear a little of "Summer Madness".

[00:29:39] **Music:** “Summer Madness (1976/Live at the Rainbow Theatre, London)” from the album *Light of Worlds* by Kool & the Gang.

(Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.)

[00:29:59] **Jesse Thorn:** That, of course, has been in a hundred hip-hop records, but probably most notably DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince.

[00:30:07] **Robert Bell:** Oh, yeah! He was always at the bank with that.

[00:30:10] **Jesse Thorn:** I love your bass sound on “Summer Madness”. That that big kind of open sound. It's gorgeous.

[00:30:20] **Robert Bell:** Yeah. Thank you. That was—I believe that was my precision. In the early days, I played a Fender jazz. I have a small hand. I was comfortable with that. But some of the tracks I played, precision was a little bit more work. The precision bass. Yeah. But I believe that was a precision bass one.

[00:30:39] **Jesse Thorn:** Now, when dance music shifted from funk to disco, Kool & the Gang got a little bit lost. You know, I was watching a TV documentary from the mid-'80s, and you and some of the other guys in the band who had been in the band this whole time—I mean, not just your brother, but you know, the core of the band was you and your friends from when you were 13.

[00:31:08] **Robert Bell:** Yeah. George Brown, Dennis Thomas, Charles Smith. Yeah.

[00:31:12] **Jesse Thorn:** So, all of you are talking a little bit about not just your records not selling as well as they had, but also like not knowing how you fit in to pop music then. Did you wonder when your two disco-ish records didn't really hit, if that was that?

[00:31:39] **Robert Bell:** Well. We did an album called *Everybody's Dancing*. And we cut that down in Philly. And we had an orchestra sound on there, more like the club—the disco. We was trying to fit in.

[00:32:01] **Jesse Thorn:** More female vocals. “Open Sesame”, which is—that's a good record that's on the *Saturday Night Fever* soundtrack—came from those years.

[00:32:09] **Robert Bell:** Yeah, but that's all. I was leading up to “Open Sesame”. So, my brother said, “Well, I got this track. And I'm gonna put it on the floor.” One on the floor, a disco beat. But he said, “I want to put more of a jazz horn line on top. To the disco beat.” And that's when he came up with “Open Sesame”. And if you listen to “Open Sesame” and listen to the horns—if you take and put a swing beat to that (*sings a few bars*) you got jazz.

(Music fades in.)

But we put it straight on the floor, not knowing that there was this movie that was gonna come out, called *Saturday Night Fever*. And I think it was De-Lite Records and Sony Records said, “Uh, there’s a part in this movie that we can probably use ‘Open Sesame.’”

[00:33:15] **Music:** “Open Sesame” from the album *Everybody’s Dancing* by Kool & the Gang.

*Groove with the genie*

*Open sesame of love*

*(Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.)*

[00:33:33] **Robert Bell:** And the funny thing about it, the record company said, “Well, we ain’t gonna get a lot of money for it, but we got the publishing and the writing.” We didn’t know that thing gonna turn around and sell over 70 million records. And it wasn’t until Michael Jackson came out with *Thriller* that sold more records than *Saturday Night Fever*.

But that was the blessing within itself. But then at the same time, still disco was having—disco was having a hard time. They were like burning disco records in a stadium in Chicago, and there was this anti-disco movement going on.

[00:34:11] **Jesse Thorn:** And you guys hadn’t like—obviously, having a track on one of the biggest selling records of all time is good for your bank accounts if you got the publishing on the song. But you know, your disco records weren’t selling especially well. You were sort of an awkward fit into that disco world, because as you said, disco songs needed that four on the floor beat, because the DJs were mixing continuously. Like that was like the great innovation of disco was a DJ could make it seem like one song lasted forever, because they could mix continuously, ‘cause the songs all had that four on the floor beat.

[00:34:50] **Robert Bell:** To the same beat. Yeah.

[00:34:51] **Jesse Thorn:** You know, nobody ever had to leave the dance floor. And you guys could do your version of that, but it was an awkward fit. And then, by the time people were burning the records and turning against it, you know, a lot of people who had tried to do it—that was just the end for them. There’s only a few that made it through, you know? So, before you started hitting again, did you think uh-oh or did you think, well, we got a next thing to do. This isn’t gonna be a problem.

[00:35:29] **Robert Bell:** Well, we got a little uh-oh, ‘cause some of the people in the neighborhood had said, “Huh, you guys—are you guys still together? Uh, do you still play?”

I said, “Yes. We’re still together. We still play. We were out on the tour with the Jackson 5 when Michael Jackson was—when he was with the Jackson 5. And a guy by the name of Dick Griffey, who had SOLAR Records, he came to us. He said, “You guys are doing great on the tour.”

And we said okay. He said, “But, uh, I think you need a lead singer.”

And we said, “A lead singer?”

He said, “Yeah, I think you guys need to get a lead singer.”

[00:36:11] **Jesse Thorn:** And this was a man who knew what he was talking about. I mean, you mentioned he founded SOLAR Records, the sound of Los Angeles. Like, the acts on that label—I guess, what? The Whispers were on that, weren't they? And the Midnight Star, Shamar. Those were some of the acts that figured out how to make dance music and sweet soul music that lasted into the '80s.

[00:36:37] **Robert Bell:** Yeah, so we thought about it. And so, we said, “Well, you know, the Commodores have Lionel Richie. Earth, Wind & Fire has Maurice White and Philip Bailey. Maybe it's time to make that change.” And some of our music, you can actually sing on top of it. You know, because it was instrumental. There was room in there, you know. So, we were recording at the House of Music in New Jersey, and Eumir Deodato was there, and he was producing his album. And then you had—Frankie Valli was coming through there, Meatloaf, etc., etc..

So, the owner of the studio said, “Well, I know this guy. He's with a group called the Fillet of Soul.” He said, “But he might be an interesting guy for you guys.” So, of course, you know, it was J.T. Taylor. J.T. came over. And my brother played some chord progressions and had him sing through it. You know, a little jazz, a little funk. And then he said, “You know what? You sound like a young Nat King Cole.”

He said, “Oh?” (*Laughs.*) Anyway, we didn't—all of this, we didn't audition anybody else.

[00:37:57] **Jesse Thorn:** He thought he was auditioning to be a backup singer, by the way.

[00:38:00] **Robert Bell:** Yeah. Now my wife and I was hanging out in New York, at Studio 54 and Régine's. And we noticed that every weekend they had a ladies' night. I said, “Hm, that's interesting.” I went back to the guys. I said, “I got a good idea for one of the first songs that we're gonna do with J.T..”

He said, “What?”

I said, “Ladies' night.”

So, my brother said, “Wow, I got one of those all over the world!”

And then George Brown was working on the music side of that. And the track came from George in the city, who's trying to make our—I guess you can call it a comeback. He's walking from the office down to get something to eat, and he knows people walking in New York. And he's watching the footstep. (*Sings a few bars.*) People walking! A part of the track.

*(Music fades in.)*

So, he had the track. My brother had the hook, and I had the name.

[00:39:02] **Music:** “Ladies’ Night” from the album *Ladies’ Night* by Kool & the Gang.

*Oh yes, it’s ladies’ night*

*And the feeling’s right*

*Oh yes, it’s ladies’ night*

*Oh, what a night (oh, what a night)*

*Oh yes, it’s ladies’ night*

*(Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.)*

[00:39:15] **Robert Bell:** “Ladies’ Night” became a huge hit for us. Frankie Crocker in New York broke that record, and the rest was history. What’s “Ladies’ Night”? That’s our first record.

[00:39:29] **Jesse Thorn:** Do you think you would’ve made the turn and brought in a singer if you hadn’t had that uh-oh moment? Do you think you could have done it?

[00:39:40] **Robert Bell:** Well, again, you know, we felt we were doing pretty good at what we were doing. You know, we had just came off of 70 million records from—with the *Saturday Night Fever*.

[00:39:50] **Jesse Thorn:** But you’d been a decade of what you were. You’d been a decade without a lead singer.

[00:39:55] **Robert Bell:** Yeah. Right, right, right. But we felt it was time to—you know, to make that change.

[00:40:01] **Jesse Thorn:** And it turned out that that first record, *Ladies’ Night*—I mean, that was—again, I mean it was another gigantic career transformation for you.

[00:40:11] **Robert Bell:** Right, right. Right. Now, “Ladies’ Night”, we’re out in LA. We won two American Music awards for “Ladies’ Night”, and the vamp of “Ladies’ Night”, my brother came up with another idea. You’re gonna go, “This is your night tonight. Come on, let’s all celebrate.” Now, he said, “I got another song.”

We said, “What?”

“Celebration”! And he played this track, and it had that kinda down home feeling to it, down there somewhere in Birmingham, Alabama, and grandma and grandpa are sitting there on the porch in the rocking chairs. “Hey, boy.” (*Laughs.*) That track just felt right. And then, we stuck in there that yahoo and got that Midwestern vibe to it. And—

*(Music fades in.)*

Now, the song was not a great written song. It was the right type of song for the right time for us. ‘Cause there was other “Celebration”s. Madonna had a “Celebration”. Other groups was doing “Celebration”, but we didn't know that this “Celebration” was gonna be so huge.

[00:41:20] **Music:** “Celebration” from the album *Celebrate!* by Kool & the Gang.

*It's a celebration*

*Celebrate good times, come on!*

*(It's a celebration)*

*Celebrate good times, come on!*

*(Let's celebrate)*

*(Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.)*

[00:41:39] **Jesse Thorn:** I interviewed Charlie Wilson, famously of the Gap Band, of course. And he has this vibrant career now, but they came out sort of parallel to you. They're another band that—you know, that was a funk band all the way through the '70s and managed to make it through the disco era and have huge hits in the '80s. And he lost himself during that time. He ended up living on the street for real. You know, he told me, “If I wanted to make music, I went into the Goodwill and played the piano.”

And that wasn't uncommon in that time, because things were so bananas in the music industry in the '80s. So much money and especially so much cocaine.

*(Robert chuckle.)*

And you know, like as you mentioned, you were gonna Studio 54 with your wife. How did the lot of you—you know, friends from when you were 13—stay within yourselves as you had this kind of crazy run of hits that, you know, you maybe never expected.

[00:42:45] **Robert Bell:** Yeah, I mean it was about the—the Kool & the Gang evolution of our music. It just—we just continued to grow and continued to try different things, you know, with our music. Or—and it did quite well for us. I mean, you take a song like “Joanna”; “Joanna” was the most played record of the year. We got an award for that. You know, people would say—our defense would say, “Oh, wow, that's too pop. Or that's so corny,



‘Joanna’.” (*Laughs.*) But hey, Charles Smith—one of the founding members—was writing the song, and he wanted to call it “Dear Ma”. And he was in the studio, and we were in there. And J.T. and Jim Bonifant and (*inaudible*). And he was in there trying to sing “Dear Ma”.

The hook to this track wasn't working, so one of the guys said, “Well, why don't you try somebody's—a lady's name?” He said okay. And then another guy said, “Well, what about Joanna?” He went back in; he started doing (*singing*) Joanna. That worked. And we didn't know that. Most played record of the year. Yeah. And then a lot of different things started happening, you know, with our music. You know, like with “Fresh” or “Get Down On It”.

[00:44:11] **Jesse Thorn:** Kool, “Joanna” is a little corny.

[00:44:14] **Robert Bell:** (*Laughs.*) I know!

[00:44:15] **Jesse Thorn:** It's a great—it's a great song, don't get me wrong. Its corniness is one of its strengths, I would say. But it is. It is a corny song. It's sweet. It's a beautiful record too, but—

[00:44:27] **Robert Bell:** Yeah, it is. Yeah, it did quite well. You know. So, there it is. We went through that. 10 years later, J.T. decides to leave. He wants to go on his own. He wants to go solo. And I can kinda see that to some degree, ‘cause now Lionel Richie left, went on his own, successful. Michael Jackson left, went on his own, successful.

So, we were having—those type of things were happening. And I told J.T. that, “Listen, you can still be in the band, but do your thing and still be in the band like Phil Collins did with Genesis. And etc., etc..” He didn't wanna do that, so he went on. And then we had to rethink our career. So, we went into markets that we wouldn't normally go into. We would just play France, England, Germany. And after that, we started going to Spain. We went into Italy. We went into Czechoslovakia, went into Romania, we went into Russia. We just expanded all through Europe, and we expanded all through Asia, Singapore, Bangkok, Thailand, Japan, all through South America.

[00:45:51] **Jesse Thorn:** At that point, you must have known like, “Look, we know what we're doing. We can start a party.”

[00:45:58] **Robert Bell:** Right. And we became very successful with that, during that time period. J.T. Taylor came back in the band in 1995. We did another album. We had “Salute to the Ladies” and a couple other songs, but it didn't quite happen like it was before. So, he got frustrated. He left again in 1999. So, like Prince, right? Huh? So, he left. And so, we went into the 2000s, and we continued to grow. Now, five years ago, we get a call. We're playing in London at the Glastonbury Festival. On that festival you had Coldplay. You had U2. A lot of rock groups. And we played on that festival.

Now, David Lee Roth was in London at the time. He happened to see us on the BBC. So, he said, “Hey.” He called up Eddie with Alex. He said, “I have the band I want to be our support band. Not our opening act, our support band.”

They said, “Okay, who?”

He said, “Kool & the Gang.”

They said, “Kool & the Gang?!” They said, “What you been smoking over there, man?”

He said, “Listen, I just saw these guys rock the Glastonbury Festival. You guys want me back?” This is when he came back with his—the re-celebration, and he came back into the band. He said, “I’m bringing Kool & the Gang with me.”

*(Jesse laughs.)*

And we ended up doing 48 shows with Van Halen. He told me that his family, the 60%—wait a minute, I didn’t know that. He said that “In the early days, we used to play your songs. Like, “Funky Stuff”, “Jungle Boogie”, out in LA.” I didn’t know that either. He said, “We have the song ‘Jump’ and you got ‘Celebration’.” And then, well, you know what he said after that? He said, “Kool, let’s go out and have a party.”

[00:48:06] **Jesse Thorn:** We’ll finish up with Robert Bell in just a minute. After the break, Kool & the Gang have been making music for over half a century, and they’re still releasing new music today. What keeps them heading back to the studio? Robert Bell tells me when we return. It’s *Bullseye* from [MaximumFun.org](https://www.maximumfun.org) and NPR.

[00:48:29] **Promo:**

*(Celebratory noise-maker honk and applause.)*

**Music:** Relaxed synth.

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(Noise-maker honk. Music fades out.)

[00:49:07] **Transition:** Thumpy synth music with light vocalizations.

[00:49:11] **Jesse Thorn:** Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is Robert "Kool" Bell. He's a musician, songwriter, and founding member of the soul group Kool & the Gang. They have a new album called *People Just Wanna Have Fun*. It's out July 14th. You can also catch them on tour. Let's get back into our conversation.

Kool & the Gang have been remarkably steady for a band that has been together since 1964. But in the last few years, you've started to lose people. Your brother passed away. He wasn't the only person from the band that passed away.

[00:49:55] **Robert Bell:** Right. I lost my brother. I lost Dennis Thomas, from the original members in the band. And then, it was—in the past it was Rick West, Spike Mickens, Charles Smith, Clifford Adams. There's only two of us left. It's just George and I now.

[00:50:18] **Jesse Thorn:** You could probably retire off your publishing from the one song on the *Saturday Night Fever* soundtrack, much less, you know, whatever piece of the publishing you got on "Summertime" or whatever, right? And you're in your 70s. So, what keeps you out on the road? You know, you made two records. This isn't, you know, *People Just Wanna Have Fun*, this year's record, follows up a record from 2021. So, what moves you to do it?

[00:50:48] **Robert Bell:** Well, I mean, we love the music. The challenge is always there, as to whether or not we can keep going. Our fan base is strong. Our fan base'll hear that Kool & the Gang is not gonna come to Czechoslovakia again? (*Inaudible.*) Tokyo? You know, we got true fans. I call 'em gang heads. (*Laughs.*) We got true fans that people still want—you know, I gotta say, you get the same question with the Rolling Stones. Now, they made way more money than what we did, but they have their fights; they have the arguments. And then, they "Hey, let's saddle up. Let's go back out again." You know, a lot of groups are like that. You know, B.B. King stayed out there until he passed.

Yeah, I guess it's just the lifestyle. Once a musician, an artist—I guess that's who we are. That's what we were blessed to be. This is our contribution to the world.

[00:51:47] **Jesse Thorn:** Do you think you're just gonna—do you think you're gonna work forever? You think you're gonna work until you can't—until you can't move your hands anymore?

[00:51:55] **Robert Bell:** (*Chuckles.*) That's a good question. Right now, I enjoy what I'm doing. But you know, I'm not getting any younger. You know. Shoot, old arthritis might pop in on me. Uh, shoot, whatever. (*Laughs.*) You know, I guess it's a blessing being alive right now and doing what I do. But I don't know when my clock's gonna stop. So, right now I'm just trying to live my life.

[00:52:30] **Jesse Thorn:** Well, I'm so grateful to you for taking the time to talk to me. It's a real honor and a real pleasure.

[00:52:34] **Robert Bell:** Well, thanks. Thanks for having me.

[00:52:36] **Jesse Thorn:** Robert “Kool” Bell of Kool & the Gang, a Genuine living legend. Their new album is called *People Just Wanna Have Fun*. You can also catch them on tour. We'll include a link to their dates on our *Bullseye* page.

Let's go out with one more song from their new album, which is—I mean, much better than it has any business being. This one is called “We Are The Party”.

[00:53:01] **Music:** “We Are the Party” from the album *People Just Wanna Have Fun* by Kool & the Gang.

*Hey, hey*

*Everybody party, we bring the party*

*We make the party go*

*We are the party, we bring the party*

*We make the party go*

*Hey!*

*Stepping out by these people on the ground*

*Sure, you know it's bound to turn up (turn up)*

*Word of mouth says that K&G's in town (you wanna kick it?)*

*To show you how we like to funk (hello) and party, baby*

*We are the party, we bring the party*

*We make the party go (hey!)*

*We are the party, we bring the party*

*We make the party go (hey!)*

*Hands up high like a magnet to the sky*

*Moving side to side (up in the air like you just don't care)*

*And like a star, I can see you from afar*

*So, let the music use you, baby*

*That's right, we are the party*

*We are the party, we bring the party*

*We make the party go (hey!)*

*We are the party, we bring the party*

*We make the party go*

*(Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue.)*

[00:54:40] **Jesse Thorn:** That is 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. Although, we are actually in the office right now, and I got an electric car, and I found an electric car plug a block away. So, it's one of those ones where you can't park there unless your car's plugged in. So, my car's plugged in right now. I'm loving it.

Our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producers are Jesus Ambrosio and Richard Robey. Our production fellow at Maximum Fun, Bryanna Paz. We get booking help from Mara Davis. Our interstitial music is composed and provided to us by DJW, also known as Dan Wally. He's probably at home listening to Kool & the Gang albums right now! Our theme song is by The Go! Team. It's called "Huddle Formation". Thanks to The Go! Team, thanks to their label, Memphis Industries.

*Bullseye* is on YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook. Find us in those places. We share our interviews in all those places, and I hope that you will share our interviews with other people. You can also find them at [NPR.org](http://NPR.org). Please do. Please, if you like this interview with Kool Bell, tell somebody about it. I think that's about it. Just remember, all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

[00:55:59] **Promo:** *Bullseye* with Jesse Thorn is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.

*(Music ends.)*