

[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.

[00:00:26] **Jesse Thorn:** It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. Time now for The Song That Changed My Life. It's a segment we do where we get musicians to talk about the music that made them who they are. This week, Craig Finn. He's the front man of The Hold Steady.

[00:00:39] **Music:** “Constructive Summer” from the album *Stay Positive* by The Hold Steady.

*Me and my friends are like*

*The drums on “Lust for Life”*

*We pound it out on four toms*

*Our psalms are sing-along songs*

*(Music fades out.)*

[00:01:04] **Jesse Thorn:** He spent the nineties in Lifter Puller, who played angular post-punk indie rock. But when he turned to his current band, The Hold Steady, he turned squarely into rock. Rock-rock. The band is unapologetically heavy and anthemic, although the themes tend to be richer than the '70s bands that might've inspired them.

Finn isn't an opera singer. He's more of a growler, but the lyrics are smart and moving, and he is never less than profoundly passionate in delivering them. It's the kind of music that can remind a middle-aged guy how deeply he felt things when he was 17. Earlier this year, The Hold Steady released their ninth Studio album. It's called *The Price of Progress*. Here's a bit from a song off that record, “Sideways Skull”.

[00:01:55] **Music:** “Sideways Skull” from the album *The Price of Progress* by The Hold Steady.

*She ordered me a Newcastle*

*And handed me a Marlboro*

*Stuck a dove in my right hand*

*She took a quick picture*

*But even when we squinted*

*I didn't look so much like Robert Plant*

*She flew a flag that she...*

*(Music fades out.)*

[00:02:22] **Jesse Thorn:** We were very excited to hear that The Hold Steady had a new record, even more excited to have Craig Finn back on our show to talk about the song that changed his life. His pick, a not-so-heavy one: “Slip Sliding Away” by the great Paul Simon. Let's get into it.

[00:02:39] **Craig Finn:** Hey, my name is Craig Finn, and this is the song that changed my life.

[00:02:44] **Music:** “Slip Sliding Away” from the album *Back at the Tower* by Paul Simon.

*Slip sliding away, slip sliding away*

*(Music continues under the dialogue.)*

[00:03:03] **Craig Finn:** So, the first time I heard “Slip Sliding Away”, I am pretty sure it was not the original; it was a bit of a cover. It was on the playground. I grew up in Minneapolis, Minnesota—the suburbs of Minneapolis, and it's cold and icy a lot. So, the playground and the big field next to it were at times absolutely covered in ice. And mostly that was fun. But you generally spend a lot of time slipping and sliding. And I remember kids on the playground sliding around on the ice, singing “slip sliding away, slip sliding away”. And so, that's my first memory of the song. I thought it was sort of a like a playground—you know, like sing-song kind of thing that you did when you were sliding on ice.

[00:03:47] **Music:** “Slip Sliding Away” by Paul Simon.

*Slip sliding away*

*You know, the nearer your destination*

*The more you're slip sliding away*

*(Music continues under the dialogue.)*

[00:03:58] **Craig Finn:** My parents had the record Paul Simon's *Greatest Hits, Etc.*, which was on Columbia Records. And it has a lot of great songs on it. It's got “Still Crazy After all

These Years”, “Me and Julio Down by the Schoolyard”, “Kodachrome”. But there's something about “Slip Sliding Away”, always—when I was younger—it made me feel like it was adult stuff. It felt mature or something. And I think I almost see a certain type of—you know, it was stuff I was seeing on TV. It wasn't stuff I was living, but a certain type of lighting, you know, a certain type of dark piano bar or something like that that you'd see on TV. And with that, I was getting a glimpse of New York City. And you know, I'd ask my parents questions about artists. And they had Billy Joel records too, and Billy Joel and Paul Simon were two things I was connecting with from their record collection.

They said they both lived in New York. And so, I lived in, you know, a suburb in the Midwest. And so, this idea of New York City as kind of a sophisticated place where people hung out and listened to Fender Rhodes piano was attractive, you know? And the whole song what follows, lyrically—it was something that I knew was maybe a little over my head. It's adult. It's about people who are not young, who are not wild and free. It's a long ways from “fun, fun, fun until the Daddy took my T-Bird away” or something like that. You know, it's very complex and unsatisfied. But I think that that's what maybe attracted it to me, in knowing that I couldn't understand all the content. And I think that that was exciting to me in some way.

[00:05:51] **Music:** “Slip Sliding Away” by Paul Simon.

*Slip sliding away, slip sliding away*

*You know, the nearer your destination, the more ...*

*(Music continues under the dialogue.)*

[00:06:03] **Craig Finn:** So, let's talk about this song verse by verse.

[00:06:08] **Music:** “Slip Sliding Away” by Paul Simon.

*I know a man*

*He came from my hometown*

*He wore his passion for his woman like a thorny crown*

*(Music continues under the dialogue.)*

[00:06:21] **Craig Finn:** He does this verse, he says, “I know, man. He came from my hometown. He wears passion for his woman like a thorny crown.” Well, the thorny crown is a—you know, obviously a biblical reference, a Christ reference. And that's—you know, that brings some weight here that, certainly as a lapsed Catholic, has populated my songs always. But this next part, especially when he says—he says, “Dolores, I live in fear.”

[00:06:46] **Music:** “Slip Sliding Away” by Paul Simon.

*He said, 'Dolores, I live in fear'*

*'My love for you is so overpowering'*

*'I'm afraid that I will disappear'*

*Slip sliding away...*

*(Music continues under the dialogue.)*

[00:07:04] **Craig Finn:** And that thing of putting a woman's proper name in the middle of the verse, to me, that really snaps things into focus. You know, you knew about his woman. He has a passion for his woman. Well, still kind of fuzzy, but all of a sudden he says—he says, *(singing)* “Dolores.” And I'm like, oh my god, I can see her. And it becomes so much more real. And I think I've done that a million times in songs—dropped a woman's name in the middle of the verse, and I think it might start here. So, I think that's one way that this may have changed my life, so to speak.

He's kind of balancing between the small—you know, what's happening in the room, with this great big force. You know, my love is so overpowering that I'm afraid I might—that I'll disappear. Could this love actually wipe him off the Earth? You know, when I'm eight years old and sitting on the floor in front of the stereo, that's a big thing to consider.

[00:08:04] **Music:** “Slip Sliding Away” by Paul Simon.

*You know, the nearer your destination*

*The more you're slip sliding away*

*And I know a woman*

*Became a wife*

*These are the very words she uses to describe her life*

*She said, 'A good day ain't got no rain'*

*She said, 'A bad day's when I lie in bed'*

*'And think of things that might have been'*

*(Music continues under the dialogue.)*

[00:08:39] **Craig Finn:** The second verse, he's so amazing with words. You know, he says, “I know a woman became a wife. These are the very words she uses to describe her life.” So,

know really only one thing about this woman: that she's married. She became a wife, you know? So, when she says, "A good day ain't got no rain; a bad day's when I lie in bed and think some things that might have been,"—he tells us right there that her marriage is unhappy, I think.

You know, I mean, I think the only thing we know about her is that—one, that she's married and two, that she's unsatisfied. I think that that's just a brilliant second verse, that he tells so much in eight short lines that I'm just in awe of all that he communicates there. And you know, the pain of growing old and maybe—as he says—not reaching his destination. People not reaching their destination. You know, I think that speaks to sort of the slowness of how we change. You know? I mean, we can—you know, one day you wake up, and you figure out you're not gonna be an astronaut after all. That is how life is sometimes. And that is one of the disappointing things amongst the joys. And I think that he speaks really beautifully about that here, in the song.

What I also love is this sense of changing expectations. And I think that, you know, as a songwriter—as an artist—whatever art you're doing, you're kind of like—there is this sense of every time you make something, you're marking your height against the wall. Maybe not your physical height, but your sort of emotional height. Like, you know, every record—I always say, you know, every record's about growing older because you gotta get older to make the next one. You know, it's—you're two years older, so you have a different perspective.

[00:10:32] **Music:** "Slip Sliding Away" by Paul Simon.

*And I know a father who had a son*

*He longed to tell him all the reasons for the things he'd done*

*(Music continues under the dialogue.)*

[00:10:38] **Craig Finn:** "All the reasons for the things he had done" is, again, that sort of adult thing. You know, explaining divorce or falling out of love or just disillusionment to a child is a difficult thing and maybe something you would just wanna skip. I don't know. If it is a divorce, it's certainly a love that—a disappointment with how life's turned out and a disillusionment and, you know, heartbreak, etc.. But especially that kind of adult disappointment and disillusionment is not what you always hear on the radio. You know, it's not—you know—the other things I was probably hearing at the time. Certainly, I didn't hear it. *Saturday Night Fever*, which would probably be the other record I was listening to a lot at the time. *(Chuckles.)*

But Billy Joel I was listening to with Paul Simon, and again, that New York thing—I maybe felt like New York is where you go to be a disillusioned adult. And here I am.

[00:11:42] **Music:** "Slip Sliding Away" by Paul Simon.

*Believe we're gliding down the highway*

*When, in fact, we're slip sliding away*

*Slip sliding away, slip sliding away*

*You know the nearer your destination*

*The more you're slip sliding away*

*(Music continues under the dialogue.)*

[00:12:02] **Craig Finn:** I love songs to tell a story, and his were some of the first I encountered that told you about, you know, what was happening to these characters. I think “Slip Sliding Away” changed my life in a few ways. One, it just made me a close listener. It made me wanna learn more about the people in songs and think more about them. And I think that led myself to—led me to become a songwriter myself. But I also think it gave me a mental image of both adulthood and New York City that—I had something to think about. And maybe if neither ended up exactly how I viewed it at that time, it gave me something to point at or to ponder as I approached both.

*(Song ends.)*

[00:13:07] **Jesse Thorn:** Craig Finn on the song that changed his life, “Slip Sliding Away” by Paul Simon. The Hold Steady's new album, *The Price of Progress*, is out now. The band also just released a new book. It's called *The Gospel of the Hold Steady: How a Resurrection Really Feels*. It's a montage of photographs and short stories from over the years. It was put together by the band's members.

*(Music fades in.)*

Let's end things with another track from The Hold Steady's new album. This one's called “Sixers”.

[00:13:36] **Music:** “Sixers” from the album *The Price of Progress* by The Hold Steady.

*She got a sixer from the store down the street*

*Stayed up watching basketball replays*

*There's a reason why she can't go to sleep*

*And it's got nothing to do with LeBron James*

*It has to do with a chemical reaction*

*Stimulated synapses, the snapping and the crackling*

*The doctor gave her something to focus her attention*

*She's got a six-month supply in the cupboard in the kitchen*

*Upstairs, she hears footsteps, and she has an idea*

*(Music continues under the dialogue.)*

[00:14:22] **Jesse Thorn:** That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye* is created from the homes of me and the staff of Maximum Fun, in and around greater Los Angeles, California. At my house, another giant branch fell out of this tree on the sidewalk out front! Anyways, beautiful tree.

The show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producers are Jesus Ambrosio and Richard Robey. You think I'm old? This is what I talk about. I have my own radio show. I'm just complaining about this tree. Our production fellow at Maximum Fun is Bryanna Paz. We get booking help from Mara Davis. Our interstitial music is by DJW, the Great Dan Wally. Dan is on Instagram [@DJWSounds](#), and he posts almost every morning. He'll post a new beat with a little video that he made for it. It's like his like morning practice, and it's so cool. So, you should go follow Dan on Instagram. [@DJWSounds](#). Our theme song is called "Huddle Formation", written and recorded by The Go! Team. Thanks to The Go! Team. Thanks to their label, Memphis Industries.

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

[00:15:38] **Promo:** *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of [MaximumFun.org](#) and is distributed by NPR.

[00:15:44] **Music:** "Sixers" by The Hold Steady.

*Being careful not to spill*

*He starts mixing drinks, measuring the gin*

*Getting down the glassware, muddling the mint*

*They talk about their work and where they went to school*

*How the city's kind of changed*

*How it used to be so cool...*

*(Music fades out.)*