

[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 and is distributed by NPR.

[00:00:09] **Jesse Thorn:** It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. In the early 2000s, when he was still in his 20s, he was called Young Jeezy. He was brash and audacious. On his major label debut, he called himself your favorite rapper's favorite rapper.

[00:00:25] **Music:** “Standing Ovation” from the album *Let's Get It: Thug Motivation 101* by Jeezy.

Now, I'm your favorite rapper's favorite rapper

Hey! Now, I'm your favorite trapper's favorite trapper

The absolute truth, yeah, no joke

Who, me?

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

[00:00:38] **Jesse Thorn:** The production back then was, as you can hear, also brash and audacious. Orchestral hits, big bold synth stabs, and the 808 drums—always an 808 cranked up into the front of the mix.

[00:00:51] **Music:** “Standing Ovation” by Jeezy.

'til the money talks like Charlie Sheen

These are more than words

This is more than rap

This here's the streets, and I am trap

Standing ovation, standing ovation

(Music fades out.)

[00:01:07] **Jesse Thorn:** It's trap music, an Atlanta original in its biggest, most bombastic form. And on those records, “Let's Get It”, “Thug Motivation 101”, “The Inspiration”, “The Recession”, Young Jeezy helped bring trap to the mainstream. But these are rap albums! And it is rap month here on *Bullseye*, not producer month! So, what does Jeezy bring to the game?

Well, that audacity that we talked about. And an incredible voice. Gravelly and impossibly deep. And certainly, he isn't the most intricate MC, but he is immensely quotable.

On Kendrick Lamar's masterpiece, *good kid, m.A.A.d city*, Kendrick name drops and quotes Jeezy directly.

[00:01:53] **Transition:** Music swells then fades.

[00:01:54] **Clip:**

Kendrick Lamar: So, what's that Jeezy song say? "'Cause last time I checked—"

Several Speakers: (*In unison.*) "I was the man on these streets!"

[00:01:58] **Transition:** Music swells then fades.

[00:01:59] **Jesse Thorn:** Jeezy is now 45. He dropped the "Young" from his name more than a decade ago. And he has a book: *Adversity for Sale: You Gotta Believe*. It just came out last month. He isn't the trap star he was in the early 2000s, but he's still making hits, still bombastic, still growling, and still beloved. Here's a recent single from the man himself. It's called "MJ Jeezy".

[00:02:22] **Music:** "MJ Jeezy" from the album *SNOFALL* by Jeezy.

... heard he whip with one glove (Woo)

Said the shoes so flat, moonwalk on them (Yes)

Gotta use a Brillo pad, white stuff on them dishes (Hey)

Back when I copped the Chevy, white guts on them

When I'm in the D, white buffs on them (Yeah)

Fifty in the duffle bag, and you know I'm gonna move it (Move it)

Half a million in cash and a Rolex to prove it (Yeah)

S-curl, yeah, he back talking greasy (Yeah)

Down in Lauderdale, they call him Michael Jackson Jeezy (Yeah)

.9 in the pot...

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

[00:02:44] **Jesse Thorn:** Before we get into my interview with Jeezy, I do want to let you know that there are some heavy subjects in this conversation: drug use, violence, some other things. So, if you or someone you're listening with is sensitive to that, we wanted to give you a heads up.

[00:03:00] **Music:** “MJ Jeezy” by Jeezy.

Gang know I got it in (I got it in)

Black Glove know I came and got a ten (Damn)

Give me three days, I'll be back again (Yeah)

(Music fades out.)

[00:03:07] **Jesse Thorn:** Jeezy, welcome to *Bullseye*. I'm so happy to have you on the show.

[00:03:09] **Jeezy:** Oh man, that was some great theme music right there.

[00:03:12] **Jesse Thorn:** I love—I'm gonna be frank with you, I love it when I can see somebody, we're playing their record into the headphones, and I can tell that they like it. You know what I mean? I like it when somebody's vibing with their own music, you know what I mean?

[00:03:27] **Jeezy:** Yeah. No, it's a vibe, man. I remember making that record. And it was crazy. I was in Fort Lauderdale, because I used to hang down there when I was younger. And when I started to gain some fame in the music business, I remember I went back and I'm at this video shoot, and all these kids kept screaming, “Michael Jackson Jeezy!” And I'm like, yo, they talking about me? And it became a thing for a lot of them in Florida, so every time I'm there and people see me out, they just call me Michael Jackson Jeezy.

[00:03:57] **Jesse Thorn:** That's good. It's good to have a spring break nickname in Fort Lauderdale.

[00:04:00] **Jeezy:** Right.

(They laugh.)

[00:04:05] **Jesse Thorn:** Well, I really enjoyed your book. Thank you for it.

[00:04:08] **Jeezy:** Oh, man, I receive that, brother.

[00:04:10] **Jesse Thorn:** Let's talk a little bit first about your childhood. Your father was in the service, and a lot of the time he didn't live with your family, or you didn't live with him. But you did live with him for a time when you were little.

[00:04:27] **Jeezy:** Yeah, so we lived together until my parents got a divorce. So, I lived in Hawaii, I lived in Japan, and a few other places. And when they got a divorce, that's when I went back to South Georgia.

[00:04:43] **Jesse Thorn:** How old were you when you lived in Japan?

[00:04:45] **Jeezy:** I can't remember the age. I was young, maybe nine, ten, something like that. I came back to South Georgia around the time that I was 13, 14, maybe 15 years old.

[00:04:55] **Jesse Thorn:** I can't even—like, on the one hand, I can imagine going to Japan at nine or ten in the sense that when you're nine or ten, you're still figuring out who you are as an independent human being and how the world works. So, maybe the fact that the whole world is upside down is not as big of a deal. But on the other hand, you're still figuring out who you are and how the world works, and so the whole world being upside down is a completely gigantic deal. You know what I mean?

[00:05:24] **Jeezy:** Well, what it was, was I was removed from what I knew, which was my comfort zone, family, you know, the neighborhood, grandma's cooking. And I basically was put somewhere that I had to adjust, and what I did was took a lot of the bad habits that I already had and just really went to work there, because it was like new territory. And the thing that happened that was significant when my parents got divorced and I had to move back there, you know—and that's why I give praise to my father, because he was a good man. He showed us the world before we even knew the world exists. 'Cause when you're in the neighborhood, you know, you're talking about a 10-mile radius, that's your whole world.

So, when I got back to the hood, I knew that there was beaches and palm trees and sushi and all these things. And nobody that I was growing up with at the time understood that. They didn't really believe me. So, my pursuit was to get back to what I knew. And that's how I kind of started indulging in the street life, because I didn't want to work at a factory. And imagine that. You know, you 14 years old, you don't—you're already thinking that you don't want a job. You want to become a boss. And that's where it all started for me.

[00:06:34] **Jesse Thorn:** Well, let's start talking about nine or ten, because when you say you were—you know, your horizons were expanding more than just the kind of you're from the hood, you see the hood, and it's hard to see past it. Like, you're from a place with 4,500 people.

(Jeezy confirms.)

Like, you know, we're not talking about New York City, we're talking about—

[00:07:00] **Jeezy:** There's that. *(Laughs.)*

[00:07:01] **Jesse Thorn:** You know what I mean? So, that piece of it, it would be hard to overstate. (*Chuckles.*) You know what I mean?

[00:07:08] **Jeezy:** But the thing is, I mean, we can give it 4,500, but probably then it was probably about 2,700. 3, 000 at the most. And maybe we had three or four traffic lights, maybe.

[00:07:25] **Jesse Thorn:** You started getting into trouble when you were in Japan. I mean, you were—you write in the book about stealing from the exchange on the base and then kind of getting out and about.

[00:07:37] **Jeezy:** I pretty good too. I was pretty good.

(*They chuckle.*)

[00:07:42] **Jesse Thorn:** How did you get into that?

[00:07:45] **Jeezy:** Well, it was because—you know, when I left the States, I already had those type of habits, but I didn't look at it as a bad thing. I just feel like I was an ambitious kid that wanted things that I couldn't afford. And as I was taking things, I felt like that was success, because I was getting away with it. So, that means I must be good at something, right? And I didn't learn until later on that stealing is not a good thing. So, I'm trying to get better at being a thief, because I'm thinking that's success, and I'm getting things that I know I couldn't afford—clothes, like even from the exchange. I was stealing music. You know, I stole my first Geto Boys CD. And that's how I was getting the music, I was really stealing it. And I mean, now nothing that I'm proud of, but at the time I thought that I was doing something that, you know, was gonna lead me down to a better road.

And it wasn't until—when I started getting paid for what I was doing, that's when I felt like I was a businessman. And imagine that. You got a nine-year-old kid who thinks he's a businessman. You know?

[00:08:58] **Jesse Thorn:** I mean, what was it like on the base with other American kids, you know, who had come from all over everywhere, whose families were in the military?

[00:09:07] **Jeezy:** Well, you know, they say one rotten apple spoils the bunch. I don't think that they—you know, these are kids that came from, you know, different parts of the world and they ain't never seen the neighborhood. And I was the leader, because I came from a place where you had to be a leader to be there. So, I think they was intrigued just by how much I knew at such a young age. And I think that's why everybody followed me. Because it kind of felt like I knew more than the other kids. I was a little more tougher. I was smarter definitely. I knew how to talk to the adults. I definitely knew how to talk to the girls. And I just was a natural born leader. And people looked to me, you know, just to have their back and, you know, to be their friend and to help them fight and to help them do things that they couldn't do on their own.

[00:09:57] **Jesse Thorn:** You had a friend who was half Black and half Japanese, a fellow kid.

[00:10:04] **Jeezy:** Yeah, Cole. His name was Cole.

[00:10:06] **Jesse Thorn:** Did he live on the base or in town?

[00:10:08] **Jeezy:** He lived on the base. His mom was Japanese. His dad was Black.

[00:10:13] **Jesse Thorn:** And so, what was it like to go to his house when you're in this sequestered world of the base, right? But you know, his mother is Japanese living in Japan. So.

[00:10:25] **Jeezy:** Well, it was a culture thing for me, because being over there is so many different cultures, right? And one thing I say about my daddy, he doesn't have a racist bone in his body, so he was just always, you know, encouraging me to go befriend different people. And Cole was just so cool, and when I used to go stay with him at night—because I used to stay with him like every weekend, and his family was like a real family. Like, they ate dinner. Like, we wasn't—my family didn't do that, like sit down at six o'clock sharp every day, we're eating dinner, we're telling stories.

His dad used to tell stories about like what happened at work, and his mom would just be so interested. You know I'm saying? We didn't have that. And one thing they used to do was every time I was there, they would make sushi. So, his mom would teach us like how to make, you know, rolls and different things. So, I'm learning about sashimi and all these different things over there. I'm learning how to eat with chopsticks and all these things. And I was just so fascinated by it. And I love sushi. Right? Ever since then, that was where I really found a love for sushi. And she would teach us how to—well, she would teach me how to make it. And I just thought that was so, so cool, you know?

And that came with me a long way. Even when I got back to the hood, I was like, “Man, ain't no sushi here.” (*Chuckling.*) You know what I'm saying? It was like the sushi was gone, you know. And that's something I love to this day. Like, sushi is one of my favorite things, so when I sit down and I have a sushi meal, I'm like, “Wow, I remember where this came from.” But to answer your question, I think they just introduced me to culture. And I had never had someone be so intentional about introducing me to their culture.

[00:12:06] **Jesse Thorn:** Were your parents getting along?

[00:12:09] **Jeezy:** (*Sighs.*) Oh, that's a good question. My mother was a little spicy. She came from a dysfunctional family. My dad was just—you know, he was a good dude. And they used to bump heads a lot, you know, so I would just see that all the time. And then, I'll never forget it. I never really understood what went on, but I just remember one day my dad was like, “We're going back to the States.” You know what I mean? “Your mother and I are not going to be together anymore.” And all I knew was my family—my sister and my mom and my dad, like we was all we had, you know, over there. And we had this life, and then all of a sudden it wasn't that life anymore.

And when we went back to the hood, you know, my mom quickly got back in her natural habitat. So, I saw sides of my mother that I'd never seen before. You know what I'm saying? So, if you ask me did they get along, I can't say yeah. You know, I feel like we didn't have family traditions. We didn't do anything that made us stronger as a family. Like, my mother had her life and things she was into, and my dad had his life. And it was just like we was the kids, and that was that.

[00:13:14] **Jesse Thorn:** Was your dad in town after you came back or—he was still in the service, right? So, he must have gone away.

[00:13:19] **Jeezy:** Yeah, he had to go back. He was in the service. He still had, you know, some more time to go serve. So, he took us back to my grandmother's house, and my mother went and stayed with her mother—which is my other grandmother that stayed on the other side of town. And that's how we was rocking for a while. And I remember my mom got this little apartment for a little while, and we was kind of off and on there. And then, she found this singlewide trailer that was like out on like a—you know, just one of those remote roads. And she wanted to move out there, so me and my sister moved in with her there. And that was around the time that I began to hustle.

And I just remember my mom crying and going through so many different things. And I just asked her one day, I was like, “Mama, what would it cost to like pay for your house?” And she told me \$3,500. And I think I had about \$5,000 under my mattress at the time, because I was hustling and saving money. And then, just one day I just came to her and just gave her the \$3,500 and paid the trailer off, right? And the crazy thing is like she didn't really ask a lot of questions about the money. You know, and it's—I'm a teenager, and she didn't really ask a lot of questions, but she knew I was up to certain things. Because at the time, she was going through her battle, her addiction. And you know, I would hide stuff in the house, and you know. We would kind of bump heads about it, because, you know, she's like, “Get this stuff out of my house.” But then, on another note, I'm just—I'm hearing things.

So, there was just that, you know. And I would never, you know, throw my mother under the bus, because I love her. You know, God rest her soul. But we just bumped heads, because I feel like whatever happened between them—even though I never asked my father, I look so much like my dad, you know. And my—I'm a junior, I'm a second, so my name is the same as my dad. And I just felt like a lot of her frustrations were being taken out on me. You know what I'm saying? To the fact, so much so that we got into an argument one day about school, and she had a 25-caliber little pistol. And she pulled it out and put it in my face. You know what I'm saying? She was just like, “Yo, you gonna go to school or else.”

And I just remember that day, I was like I'm gone. And I wanted to just live with my grandmother. And the thing about my grandmother is, like she let you do whateeeever you want. So, that was like the recipe for disaster. Because now I'm, you know, 12, 13. I don't got to come home in the regular hours. So, I'm out late at night, and then it goes from that to now I'm out until in the morning. And you know, my grandmother, for as long as I can remember, every door in my grandmother's house was unlocked all day and all night. Because I had so many uncles and aunties and cousins and everybody lived in the house, so people come in and come out as they please. And I was just able to hang out with a free range. Like, I had nobody to tell me—you know, as long as I got up and went to school, which I wasn't really with, but I just did it—nobody ever said anything.

And I didn't have a bed at the time, so I slept on the sofa by the front door. So, that was my thing. I would come get on—lay on the sofa for an hour or two, get up and go to school, and you know, just go through the motions but not really. And my grandma still loved me unconditionally. So, it was just like I didn't see the wrong in that.

[00:16:34] **Jesse Thorn:** Stick around more *Bullseye* around the corner from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

[00:16:41] **Transition:** Thumpy synth.

[00:16:45] **Jesse Thorn:** It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. I'm talking with Jeezy. The trap star just released a book called *Adversity for Sale: You Gotta Believe*.

I mean, one of the things that I was thinking about as I was reading about this part of your life in your book was that part of what made me feel worried about young Jay Jenkins was that situation. Not that there wasn't the right like rules or structure or something like that, but that being in that situation meant that a 12-year-old or a 13-year-old was living a kind of parallel and equivalent life to these relatives who were much older, you know, up to and including aunts and uncles who were into adult trouble.

[00:17:44] **Jeezy:** Right. Right. Well, that's the thing you got to realize about coming from where I'm from. You know, people been living so wrong so long, I mean, it seems right. Like, you don't know the difference, right? And I tell that story about, you know, the first time that one of my friends got killed. I didn't understand what that word meant. Like, I didn't understand what—like, he's gone; he's not coming back. I'm just like, okay, explain to me that. And that was my first taste of that, and from that point on, I really realized how real the streets were.

But to answer your question, when you see so many people around you living this criminal life, and you see that they're the front runners of what a higher quality of life looks like, you're kind of following that footstep, because that seems like the way to go. You don't really see the wrong or the bad they're doing. It seems like, okay, this is a normal thing. I'm going to do this, and I'm going to be great at it. And I'm going to have a lot of money, and I'm going to live this luxurious life. So, nobody's telling you about the problems that come along with it. Nobody's telling you about the trauma that comes along with it. Nobody's explaining to you the post-traumatic stress. Like, nobody's telling you none of this stuff. It's just like—you just dive into it headfirst.

And then you start to realize things. And I remember at a young age, just hanging around my cousins when they used to like, you know, cook crack. And being there and just being in it, you know what I'm saying? And going to school and having this anxiety and feeling like that I was a functional junkie. Like, felt like that I was addicted, so much so that I picked up a pay phone and called a drug hotline to ask them was I addicted.

[00:19:34] **Jesse Thorn:** And that was because you were so worried A) because your life was full of anxiety and trauma. I would say that's the number one reason.

(Jeezy confirms.)

But the specific thing you were worried about was not that you were using intentionally, but that you were—you were terrified you were a junkie just because you were around crack cooking so much.

[00:19:52] **Jeezy:** Right. And I was touching it. And you know, it was just—it's one of those things you have that surreal moment like, okay. And you're looking at people that are on crack, and you're seeing how their life is like spiraling, like so much so that, you know, they'll give you their car. They'll give you their house. They'll give you their kids, you know what I'm saying? And you're just like—it's almost like a zombie state. And you just think, "I don't want to be that. Like, I don't ever want to be that." And as a kid, there was nobody I can really talk to, because now if you pull somebody to the side and tell them that's what you're going through, they're going to consider you weak. Right? And you don't want that, because that makes you weak, and once you're weak in the hood, you're weak forever. Like, you can never get that back. If you don't stand up for yourself, if you're not strong when it's time, like nobody respects you.

You know, and I knew respect was a big thing, but I also didn't know what anxiety was, right? I didn't understand what trauma was. I didn't understand that I'm dealing with the fact that my parents are divorced, but I don't know what that means. 'Cause who can I talk to? There's nobody there—like, that's a normal thing. People get divorced all the time, who cares? You know, and I'm like, "I don't have a family anymore." Right? And coming up where we came up at, that's why I feel it's so important with the book, because I got to touch on these things, because these are things that shaped my life. You know, and I think that people don't speak enough on what happened, this childhood trauma.

I started to realize that it was a lot of things in my adulthood that came from my childhood. You know, I had trust issues like forever, you know what I'm saying? Like I had trust issues like you wouldn't believe, you know. My mind was, "Okay. How is this person going to try to manipulate me?" I mean, it could be anybody. It could be the pastor. You know what I'm saying? *(Chuckles.)* I'm like, "Okay, what is he going to try to do to either hurt, harm, or get over on me?"

[00:21:48] **Jesse Thorn:** There's a part in the early part of your book where you're already hustling on the street. You're like in your mid-teens, I think, and you're selling crack in a trap where you're from. And there's just a part that really struck me where you said, "I know this is hard to believe, but it just hadn't occurred to me that something could go wrong or that this was bad." And the way you put it in the book, I believe you. But it is also stunning. You know what I mean?

[00:22:31] **Jeezy:** Yeah. I mean, it's stunning when you start to lose. And I don't think that's what a lot of people understand that comes with the street life. The first friend I lost, his name was Marcus Clemens. We called him Marky Mark. And Marky Mark was one of like the first hustlers that I knew. Like, I used to go hang around him, because he had all the swag. He had all the girls, curly hair, he was just cool. And I was just so—I was so fascinated by him. And he had me do little things to help him and do all these things. And I remember one day we

was at a trap house, and he came—it was cold, so he came in with like one of those big coats on, boots. And he kicked in the door. He was like, “Yo.”

And I was like, “What's wrong man?”

And he kept like, you know, pacing. And he was like, “Man, they gave me short money.”

And I'm like, “Alright, how much they give you?”

He said, “\$8.”

I said, “How much was this supposed to give you?”

And he said, “10.”

And I said, “Okay, but what's the problem?”

And he told me, “My price is my price.” And that stuck with me from that day on. Like, he said, “If you start taking shorts, 2 turned into 2,000 and 2,000 turned into 100,000,” and so on and so on and so forth. And I didn't understand that at first, but I understand that now. But Marcus, one day when I was on my way to school—imagine this, you're on your way to school. You know, you're a kid. I'm riding in the car with my auntie, and there's all these police down by where we stand at with him.

And I said, “Well, Auntie, what happened?”

And she's like, “Oh, yeah, you know, Marcus got killed last night.”

And I'm like, “Killed? Okay, cool. Can I go hang with him when I get out of school?”

She said, “No, baby, he's gone. He's never coming back.”

And I said, “Well, did he move?”

She's like, “No, baby, he's gone. He will never be back.”

And I sat there for a minute, and I thought about it. I said, “Well, what happened?”

And she told me, she said, “From what I understand, he argued with someone who was trying to short him money on the deal. And they shot and killed him in the car and pushed him on the side of the road.” And that was the first time, right? And I didn't understand that. But if you ask me how many people that I've known or I've been affiliated with to this day that I know that I've lost from gun violence or the penitentiary, I would tell you we'd be in the high, you know, five to six of thousands of people. And from that moment that I lost Marcus, I developed this defense mechanism that I just said I wouldn't care no more. Like, I would be

heartless. And that's how I lived most of my young life to my young adult life until maybe—maybe five years ago.

I didn't know how to connect with my emotions, because I didn't have any. (*Chuckles.*) You know what I'm saying? Like, they were gone. I was numb, and I was going through the motions, and I didn't really care about anything or anyone, because I didn't know how, right? I could take care of them, make sure they're good, but I didn't know how to connect with them. And it wasn't until a couple of years ago that I really started doing the work on that, because I knew something was wrong. And I knew something was off, but when you say that, you say you lose thousands of people—like, that's equivalent to somebody being in a war, you know?

[00:25:54] **Jesse Thorn:** There's only two moments in like the whole first act of your book, you know, the first third, that are about music. One of them is when you steal that Geto Boys tape on the exchange. Which, you know, first of all, great choice.

(*Jeezy agrees.*)

Not typically—not exactly eight-year-old music, normally, but I see it. Right? The other is—I think it's your cousin who was DJing in his basement. Right?

[00:26:21] **Jeezy:** Yeah, yeah, we were in his garage.

[00:26:25] **Jesse Thorn:** Yeah, so like, you know, you've been a huge music star for 20 years now. You know what I mean? And those are like the two moments in that beginning of your story where it feels like you come to life. And it's not because it's a whole story about how you became great at rapping, because you barely rapped until later.

[00:26:52] **Jeezy:** Yeah. But the thing is like I knew then, just like I know now, that I loved music, right? And when my cousin let me on those turntables, I felt free. Like, I felt—I just felt alive, so much so that I would get lost in it. And it was up until—I don't know what chapter it is—when I was in this boot camp that I chose not to go to this young adult prison. So, you know, my dad and everybody did what they could to get me in this program. And the moment I was in there, I had like this Walkman. You know, they had the little headphones, and you can kinda scroll back and forth with the little knob and catch the radio station. And I remember listening to Tupac's “So Many Tears” and “Dear Mama”, and he just became my therapist. He became my counsel; you know what I'm saying? He became someone that I would go to when I was going through something, or I wanted to figure something out in life.

So, it was like my podcast before the podcast, right? Because a lot of people just listen to music to bob their head and to—you know. But to me I was looking for the gems and the knowledge in it. And I felt like Tupac stood for something, and it was so easy for me to listen to him and feel like he was relating to me. And that's when I knew that I heard and felt music differently. But to go back to your point, when I was hearing it back then, I was so happy. This was a different type of high when I heard Tupac. Like, this was like the ultimate. I'm like, oh my god, like, wow. And before then, I enjoyed the music. It made me happy. But now this music is giving me purpose.

[00:28:46] **Jesse Thorn:** I mean, it makes sense to me that you would connect with Tupac particularly. Because, you know, if you think of the twin poles of hip-hop at the time of Biggie and Pac, like—you know, Biggie rapped a lot more about selling crack than Tupac did. So, that's like literally, directly relatable, but like, you know, Biggie's greatest gift as a rapper was his style, like his flow and his elegance. Like, just incredibly gifted.

[00:29:16] **Jeezy:** He painted a different—he painted a more polished picture. And Pac to me was in the slums. And it was so crazy, because I would fight like every other day over Tupac and Biggie. Like, I would literally fight people. Like, we would be—it would start off a conversation and turn into an argument. And somebody's like, “Yo, Biggie over Tupac,” and I would be fighting. You know what I'm saying? (*Chuckling.*) Like, I'll be fighting in boot camp, because somebody's trying to tell me Biggie's better than Tupac, and I'm like, “No, I love Pac! You don't understand, he's the realest.” And, you know, I just went through that whole thing, you know what I'm saying?

And the crazy thing is like I've never met Tupac. I've never—and every time I talk to somebody who say they met him, I'm like glued in. I'm fascinated. I'm asking questions. Okay, what was he like? What'd he say? What'd he talk about? And one thing I love about him, like he stood for something, and he also didn't let anybody put him in a box. You know, Pac was into art, ballet, opera, fashion, movies. He was all over the place and a revolutionary, right? With a Black Panther background, you know what I'm saying? So, he stood for so much, and he had heart. I mean, he was a little guy, you know. I'm 5'8”, you know what I'm saying? So, I'm coming from that. And I just felt like we was one of the same. Like, I feel like, “Man, like that's how I feel.”

[00:30:38] **Jesse Thorn:** Most of your early rap origin story in this book is—first of all, it doesn't start until you're like 20-ish or something. But it's also mostly about you losing money trying to sell records for other people initially, then for yourself. (*Chuckles.*)

[00:30:59] **Jeezy:** Right, right. Well, the thing about it was I saw Cash Money. And I wasn't an artist. So, if you know anything about Cash Money, of course they had Lil Wayne and Juvenile and all these people, but—

[00:31:12] **Jesse Thorn:** This is Cash Money the record label.

[00:31:13] **Jeezy:** Yeah, but the people behind the scenes, which was Baby and Mannie Fresh and Suga Slim, they were stars too. And I'm like, okay, I'm not an artist, but I can do that. So, if you look at somebody who looks like they're well beyond rich and they got it all figured out, you want to be the boss. And I'm like I want to be the boss. So, that's why I went to try to get artists at first. But again, business 101. You know, I'm not keeping up with what I'm spending, because I'm betting on myself. And I definitely ain't got nothing coming in, right? Because I'm betting on these other individuals that are artists. And that lasted until I was damn near broke. And then, the artists—one went to prison for a long time. The other one, I think something happened with him, and the other guy just went back to the hood. And now I'm sitting here with all this money that we put in the studio, and we gotta figure it out.

And that's when my man told me, “Yo, you know what? You should do it. You're living the life anyway.” And that's when the star was born, because before then I had no interest in

being in the forefront. I just wanted to be in the back. You know, and it took me so long to figure that part out, because you're talking about somebody who's coming from the streets, who's basically incognito. You know what I'm saying? Who basically blends in with his surroundings, and now you're asking me to be the forefront of this. And I'm not good with a lot of attention, if that makes sense. I'm not good when the spotlight is on me, you know, at least I wasn't then. Like, I kind of felt like I should be in the shadows. And now, I basically got to be the frontrunner for this. And I have to figure out how to make songs now, because it ain't just about looking the part, and I got to actually make great music.

[00:33:09] **Jesse Thorn:** And you weren't really a rapper. I mean you described—you just grabbed—what you say is that you made hundreds of songs that sucked. (*Laughs.*)

[00:33:17] **Jeezy:** Terrible, ter-ri-ble. (*Laughs.*)

[00:33:22] **Jesse Thorn:** When did you figure out what—because you know, even today—and you're still making really good music today. Even today, you know, you're not exactly a super lyrical tongue twister.

(*Jeezy agrees.*)

Your gift lies in that commitment and depth of passion. Like, you know, there's a part in the book where Kanye West cuts your verse from a song and then asks if he can keep your ad libs. (*Chuckles.*)

[00:33:48] **Jeezy:** Well, I cut his verse from a song, and then he went and used the song. Well, he asked me to use the song. So, I gave Kanye a record that he was supposed to get on with me and T.I., and he asked me who produced the record, which was this producer named DJ Toomp, which was one of T.I.'s producers. So, he contacted Toomp. He's like, “Yo, give me his number.” So, I give him Toomp's number. He calls Toomp and gets the files. And there's what Kanye does; he changes the whole sonics of the song and sends me the verse back, and it doesn't sound like the rest of the song.

And I go, “Kanye, I can't use this. I got to turn my album in tomorrow. It's not going to work.”

And he's like, “Alright, cool.” And he contacts me about maybe six months later. He's like, “Yo, come by the studio. You in LA.”

(*Music fades in.*)

So, I went to the studio, and he goes, “Yo, you remember that song you gave me to do?” And he pressed play. And it was “wait ‘til I get my money right”.

[00:34:37] **Music:** “Can't Tell Me Nothing” from the album *Graduation* by Kanye West.

... *forget where I came from*

La-la-la-la

Wait 'til I get my money right

La-la-la-la

Then you can't tell me nothing, right

Excuse me, was you saying something?

(Music fades out.)

[00:34:53] **Jeezy:** And I was like, “Oh, wow, okay, you finished it.”

And then, he looks at me. He goes, “Hey, you mind if I keep your ad libs on it?”

And I'm like, “Actually I don't. You know, it's all good.” And that's why I know Kanye is a genius, because he knew how that would affect the culture. Because my ad libs was like the biggest part of my music at the time. It wasn't even what I was saying. It was like how I was putting it together.

[00:35:17] **Jesse Thorn:** So, that's the thing that I want to ask you—right?—is at what point did you figure out that the thing that you were bringing to the music that other people couldn't replicate was that commitment to a specific depth of feeling?

[00:35:36] **Jeezy:** Right. Well, the thing about it is, I put my pain in the music. You know what I'm saying? It was a sense of urgency there, because that's how I was really living. That's what I was really going through. So, I felt like the realer I was on the records, the more people would relate. Which was true. And the pain that I was putting on the records was helping me through the pain that I was going through. And I didn't realize that, you know, at the time when I was writing these records, I was letting my pain bleed onto these tracks. And people felt that, because they knew it was authentic, right? They knew it was real, because of all the things that was going on around me and all the whispers and everybody's talking about, you know, what they know about me.

And again, you know, going back to Tupac—that's how I was able to relate to people through my pain. Now, the style that I was doing was so unorthodox, because I never was taught how to record. So, I would rap in cadences, like uh-uh-uh-uh, uh-uh, 'cause that's all I knew, right? And what changed the game was when I would be rapping in cadences, I'm like—it'll be a gap there. And I'm like, okay, I gotta put something there to tie this all together. And that's when the ad libs were born for me. Because I would answer myself back on what I just said, and it would sound like that was my intentions. And it was almost like I was hyping myself up as I went on. And that was my secret sauce. You know how they say Chick-fil-A got its secret sauce and everybody—that was my secret sauce, because once I put it together, my voice and everything I said was the last instrument on the track. So, I would use my voice as an instrument.

And they—you know what they say, it ain't what you say is how you say it. And my key to it was simplicity. If you're sitting in a car, or you're sitting at your trap, or you're sitting at your job, or you're sitting at your school, this is going to be so simple for you. It's ABC, like you can get to the point. You can understand what I'm saying. You don't got to even think about this. You just got to feel this with me. And that was my end. I was able to say things that people relate to because they knew it to be true, but they also knew it to be—and this was the key part—lingo. It was like I was so used to talking on the phone. Right? And talking in code. I knew all the codes. So, if you're talking in code to street people, they know the codes. The radio stations don't know the code. If I'm telling somebody, “if it's taking too long to lock up, bring it back. You would show it anyway, bring a stack,” you probably don't know what that means. But I guarantee you, if you take that to some of your homies in Oakland or wherever you at or in the Bay, they're gonna be like, oh yeah, he talking about this, that, and the other.

So, it was like an unspoken code that people knew, and I was able to put that on the music, and the streets was able to decode it. So, it was like our own spoken language, right? And that's what made it so unique.

[00:38:51] **Jesse Thorn:** We'll wrap up with Jeezy in just a minute. After the break, when does he go to bed? 10? 11? 8? We'll have the answer and more about his sleep routine, but only if you stay tuned to public radio's number one source for the sleep routines of rappers, *Bullseye*, from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

[00:39:12] **Promo:**

Music: Playful ukulele.

Jesse Thorn: Hi, I'm Jesse Thorn, the founder of Maximum Fun. And I have a special announcement. I'm no longer embarrassed by *My Brother, My Brother and Me*. You know, for years, each new episode of this supposed advice show was a fresh insult, a depraved jumble of erection jokes, ghost humor, and—frankly this is for the best—very little actionable advice. But now, as they enter their twilight years, I'm as surprised as anyone to admit that it's gotten kind of good. Justin, Travis, and Griffin's witticisms are more refined, like a humor column in a fancy magazine. And they hardly ever say “bazinga” anymore. So, after you've completely finished listening to every single one of all of our other shows, why not join the McElroy brothers every week for *My Brother, My Brother and Me*?

(Music fades out.)

[00:40:07] **Transition:** Thumpy synth.

[00:40:11] **Jesse Thorn:** Welcome back to *Bullseye*, I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is Jeezy, who was once known as Young Jeezy. He's an Atlanta rapper who, alongside T.I. and Gucci Mane, helped bring trap music into the mainstream. He has a new book. It's called *Adversity for Sale: You Gotta Believe*. Let's get back into our conversation.

You've had these very high-profile beefs in your career. And as I've read about them recently, one of the things that it seems like you're most proud of is that they were resolved. And what I was thinking about them is the reactivity that can come with post-traumatic stress. That, you know, one of the things that you write about late in the book is how important it is to stop and reset. And that's something that can be really hard when you're dealing with a trauma response.

(Jeezy confirms.)

And I wonder when you came to that realization, that that was part of what was going on with you.

[00:41:18] **Jeezy:** Well, if I'm honest, it was seeing this generation—just the rate that they were dying. Right? And I know a lot of my stance on things was what I learned from Biggie and Tupac. And if you really look at it, they're both not here anymore, and they died young. Just as a lot of these cats in this game. And I was blessed to see the other side of that. And again, as I continued to work on myself, I started to understand about healing my post-traumatic stress and healing my traumas and my wounds. And also, in the same breath, started to understand what conflict resolution was. Right? Because where I'm from, if you step on somebody's shoes, they might kill you. You know, where I'm from, if you say the wrong word or say the wrong thing—you know, you're not going home that night unless you're going in a box, right? And that's the norm. And we normalize that. And what I learned with conflict resolution and just healing is that there's always a peaceful resolution.

Not that I'm this saint. I'm just this guy who just want to—I'm still a lion. Like, you can't take that. Like, your daddy's a soldier. You can't take that out of him. But what I learned is, you know, if I can save some lives, that's what's going to help me sleep better at night. Because I've seen so much murder and mayhem that that gave me nightmares for most of my life. So, this part of my life and this half of my life is pouring into my culture and also letting them know that it's okay to work some things out. And we, as a country, have had plenty of wars with people, and we've lost soldiers on both sides. But at some point, there has to be a conflict resolution for life to go on. You see what I'm saying? And we've been in a war with many nations.

[00:43:14] **Jesse Thorn:** One of the greatest challenges—I know that for me, as a child of somebody with PTSD, I'll just speak to my own experience. Like, I was lucky in many ways. My father worked really hard on himself and, you know, wasn't a violent man.

[00:43:28] **Jeezy:** Shout out. I commend him on that. It's not easy.

[00:43:32] **Jesse Thorn:** But you know, his PTSD was severe, and one of the things that I didn't really think of as being a thing until I was a grownup was the extent to which I just believed that all conflict was catastrophic, because I couldn't depend upon resolution to conflict because of the trauma. It went from zero to ten. So, it was at ten. There was no reasoning. It was all lizard brain fight or flight immediately. Right? So, even with my wife that I've been with for 20 whatever years, and I get along great—

[00:44:05] **Jeezy:** Congratulations on that, by the way. For sure.

[00:44:07] **Jesse Thorn:** Thank you. Like, if we had conflict, I'd be like, "Uh-oh, I guess we're getting a divorce."

(They laugh.)

You know what I mean?

[00:44:15] **Jeezy:** Right. That's the first thing that comes to mind.

[00:44:18] **Jesse Thorn:** Right? And like, you told a story I read somewhere about when you were having conflict with Nas, and he called you up and was like, "Hey, king."

And I was like, "Oh, right." Like, that's somebody—that's somebody who's like, able to be in that conflict and trust that it's resolvable.

[00:44:38] **Jeezy:** And let me say this, because I just want to make it clear. Like, you don't beef with Nas. I didn't have no beef with Nas. Right? Yeah, I love Nas. I respect him. But my ego got the best of me, and I disrespected someone who did nothing but show me love. And when I disrespected him, and he called me, and called me a king, he humbled me. And that's the first time I ever seen conflict resolution work, because every—all the anger that I had inside of me that I felt for whatever he said about hip-hop being dead, and I was the biggest guy in hip-hop at the time—I had to sit there and think, like, yo. He said, "Look, king. You know, I know you feel a way, but it had nothing to do with you. Da-da-dadada." And he's just talking to me like a human being. It was no loud tone. It was a calm, cool voice.

And when I hung up the phone, I said, "Damn, man, I got a whole 'nother respect for this guy." And when I called him to get on "My President is Black", he carried the same energy. And for me, that was something that I wanted to learn, right? Because I was ready to jump off the building. You know what I'm saying? *(Chuckles.)* I was ready to do whatever, but he gave me this energy that I've never felt before. Because every time that I ever disagreed with someone, then it was an all-out war. Right? Well, if somebody ever disagreed with me, there was no understanding. There was no conversation. I didn't even think to call someone that I had an issue with and say, "Hey, look, you know, that wasn't my intentions. I wasn't—you know, that ain't what I wanted to come out of this." And that was a big lesson for me.

[00:46:17] **Jesse Thorn:** Can I ask you a very literal question?

[00:46:18] **Jeezy:** For sure.

[00:46:20] **Jesse Thorn:** Do you sleep through the night?

[00:46:23] **Jeezy:** I do now. I sleep, man. Let me tell you something. I got a 9 o'clock bedtime, man. You know what I'm saying? I'm like 9:30, 10 o'clock as well, because I want to be up at 5 o'clock in the morning. But my sleep now is so peaceful. I'm the type of dude to go to sleep to white noise. You know what I'm saying? Like, I'm in that much peace. But maybe seven years ago, I couldn't say that. I barely even slept. You know, I'd probably get an hour in and keep it going. But these days, where my heart's at, where my soul is at, I'm at

peace. Like, it doesn't even matter. Like, the only reason I'm sharing—and I'm gonna be honest with you, like the questions you asking, I would never answer this over a Zoom call. (*Laughing.*)

You know what I'm saying? Because I'm like—you know what I'm saying? It's like, “Oh my god, like is he trying to send me to prison?” But I'm just so much at peace. It doesn't even matter anymore, like I'm just pouring into people. I'm leaning in. I'm leaning in. I'm leaning in, and I'm explaining that to people. Like, there is a side of life where you can be at peace. You can just go to sleep. Your mind can rest. It's just like, you know, people don't believe that. I get up every morning, I'm meditating 30/40 minutes anyway. You know what I'm saying? I'm taking 10/15 minutes to think about the things that I'm grateful for. Then, I got to pray, and then I start my day.

[00:47:48] **Jesse Thorn:** Jeezy, I'm very grateful for your time. Thank you for talking to me.

[00:47:50] **Jeezy:** For sure. For sure.

[00:47:53] **Jesse Thorn:** Jeezy. His new book is called *Adversity for Sale: You Gotta Believe*. It's a *New York Times* bestseller, and frankly, it is a really fascinating and incredible story. Very well told. It's really—it's really a great read.

[00:48:10] **Transition:** Relaxed, jazzy synth.

[00:48:14] **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. The other day I was at the farmer's market. I bought a big tomato plant at the behest of my six-year-old, who absolutely demanded 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 is Bryanna Paz. We get booking help from Mara Davis. Our interstitial music is by our friend Dan Wally, DJW. Special thanks to Troy Hermes at Hermes Sound in Atlanta for recording our interview with Jeezy. Our theme song is called “Huddle Formation”. It was written and recorded by The Go! Team. Thanks to them, and thanks to their label, Memphis Industries.

Bullseye is now on Instagram! You can find sneak peeks behind the scenes and all kinds of neat stuff [@BullseyewithJesseThorn](#). So, find us there, follow us, tell your friends about it. Share our interviews with your friends, please. We appreciate it. I think that's about it. Just remember, all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

[00:49:24] **Promo:** *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of [MaximumFun.org](#) and is distributed by NPR.

(*Music fades out.*)