

[00:00:17] **Music:** Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.

[00:00:19] **Promo:** *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.

[00:00:30] **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.

[00:00:38] **Jesse Thorn:** It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. There's a rumor about KRS-One—who, you know, some call the greatest rapper of all time. And this is probably an apocryphal rumor. Although, KRS does say outrageous stuff once in a while. Anyway, the rumor is that he said basically that if you are an MC, and you're not from New York, then you aren't part of hip-hop. Sort of like how anything from outside of Champagne is just sparkling wine, anything made outside the city is just rap.

My guest Bun B is from Port Arthur, Texas. That's 90 miles-ish outside Houston and hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of miles from New York City. In terms of culture, mindset, everything else, if you compare it to New York, it might as well be, you know, Moscow or whatever. Bun B was half of the rap group UGK, with the late Pimp C. And he is a fan of KRS-One, as we all are. He remembers reading that quote. He remembers feeling bummed about it. His groupmate, Pimp C, also took it hard. But eventually, he turned it into a badge of honor. In 2001, he rapped, “This ain't no (*sensor beep*) hip-hop records. These country rap tunes.”

Alongside the Geto Boys, UGK created a genre on their own terms: hip-hop that was native to the South, native to Texas. Their music is brilliant and raw, entirely unique. They broke ground, made hits, and made incredible records. Here's a track called “Diamonds & Wood” from UGK’s 1996 masterpiece, *Ridin’ Dirty*.

[00:02:36] **Music:** “Diamonds & Wood” from the album *Ridin’ Dirty* by UGK.

I lucked up today and didn't fall prey to none of that pistol play

But who is to say tomorrow they won't be blasting this-a-way

I'm puffing spliffs of hay, still upset about the drama here

At this time of year, I'm wiping away my dead homies' mama tears (Shit)

But naturally, them laws was always after me

So, I have to be in that manor on that five-oh-three

I'm living dastardly, must be all about survival, G

(Music fades out.)

[00:03:00] **Jesse Thorn:** And look, if you're not a hip-hop head or a Texan, maybe you don't know UGK that well, but you've heard "Big Pimpin'", right? That's UGK doing a legendary feature on that Jay-Z track. I mean, I'm talking about legendary. Here's Bun B, destroying it.

[00:03:22] **Music:** "Big Pimpin'" from the album *Vol. 3... Life and Times of S. Carter* by Jay-Z.

It's the

Big Southern rap empresario

Coming straight up out the Black barrio

Makes a mill' up off a sorry—what?

Then sit back and peep my sce-nar-i-o

Oops, my bad, that's "my scenario"

They start pointing, they say, "There he go!"

(Music fades out.)

[00:03:34] **Jesse Thorn:** UGK disbanded in 2007 after the death of Pimp C. But Bun B is still going strong. He still has some of the hottest bars in the world, and he's a mentor to an entire generation of rappers. Here's a song from Bun B's record, *II Trill*. It's called "You're Everything".

[00:03:54] **Bun B:** "You're Everything" from the album *II Trill* by Bun B.

Suede roof, neon lights, Vogue tire swang and bang

Tops drop, blades chop, fifth wheel just hanging, man

White T's, fitted hats, Jordans under dickies (dickies)

That Swisher sweet, cigarillos filled up with the sticky (sticky)

The fiftens bamming and the bass kick-kicking

Cadillac do's slamming on them po'-po's tipping

We ain't tripping just flipping these haters

(Music fades out.)

[00:04:18] **Jesse Thorn:** Bun B, welcome back to *Bullseye*. It's nice to see you.

[00:04:20] **Bun B:** Likewise, man. Thanks for having me back on.

[00:04:22] **Jesse Thorn:** I like that you're here with your brand t-shirt on. You're ready to sell some cheeseburgers.

[00:04:29] **Bun B:** Yeah. Marketing is life for me right now.

(Jesse laughs.)

I'm a walking billboard at this point.

[00:04:34] **Jesse Thorn:** You know what? I support Trill Burgers. The other day we had Master P in here, and he came with a backpack full of Snoop Dogg cereal.

[00:04:40] **Bun B:** Rap Snacks. Oh, cereal? Oh, I thought he would have had the Rap Snacks. But yeah, that's a big thing that they're pushing now is Snoop Dogg's—

[00:04:49] **Jesse Thorn:** Just pulling them out of a backpack. Like, boom, boom, boom.

[00:04:51] **Bun B:** Which makes sense, because Snoop's got like—I think he's got like a kid's cartoon. He's doing like kid's music and stuff. Snoop Dogg is probably top five salesman on the planet right now. Most recognizable people.

[00:05:02] **Jesse Thorn:** The man has a strong brand.

[00:05:04] **Bun B:** He really does. It's amazing how he's been able to transcend, you know, just being a hip-hop artist. And that's kind of the lane that I'm in now. So, I'm watching guys like Snoop and Shaq and Ice Cube and just taking notes.

[00:05:18] **Jesse Thorn:** Don't you just want to—don't you want to just get in the studio and drop bars and call it a day? You'd rather be out there selling hamburgers?

[00:05:24] **Bun B:** Why can't I do both, Jess?

[00:05:26] **Jesse Thorn:** Okay, you can do both, bud.

(Bun thanks him.)

You know what? I approve it. If you need to run anything else by me, let me know. *(Laughs.)*

[00:05:32] **Bun B:** No worries, I'm just going to put it in the group text now, so everybody knows.

[00:05:36] **Jesse Thorn:** Okay, excellent.

(They laugh.)

Bun, you grew up in Port Arthur, Texas.

(Bun confirms.)

You know, you're famous for your association with Houston, but you grew up in Port Arthur. Um, tell me a little bit about what kind of town Port Arthur was when you were a kid?

[00:05:51] **Bun B:** Well, Port Arthur is, you know, very close proximity to Beaumont, which was home of Spindletop, which was the largest oil rig—oil derrick in history. And so, pretty much Beaumont and Port Arthur all became these industrial towns that revolved around the refineries in the area. If you had a job with the refinery, you had a good living. If you had a job with a business that serviced the refineries, you had an okay living. And everything outside of that was pretty much service level. If you weren't a doctor or a lawyer, you were working class.

[00:06:25] **Jesse Thorn:** And that's what your folks did, right?

[00:06:27] **Bun B:** Yes, absolutely. My stepfather was a janitor. My mom was and still is like home care. So, yeah, still, you know, very working-class family. Very familial town, I would say, you know. If they aren't your actual cousins, they treat you like cousins in Port Arthur. Everyone's mom knows everyone kind of a thing. So, we did have that going for us, but there were not a lot of opportunities. And so, there was a bit of desperation in the city as to like, you know, what were we going to do with our lives? You had to really make a conscious decision as to whether or not you were going to find a job that would pay enough for you to have a decent life in Port Arthur, or you would immediately try to leave as soon as possible and go to, let's say, Houston, which is 90 miles west, or maybe even to, you know, New Orleans or Baton Rouge, which is, you know, three to four and a half hours east of the town.

So, I just—you know, I just try to be a positive example of, you know, one way of making it out of that town. But obviously, I'm an anomaly.

[00:07:36] **Jesse Thorn:** When you say everybody was looking for an opportunity and trying to figure out what it was, did rap seem like an opportunity when you were a kid?

[00:07:42] **Bun B:** It really—it seemed like a distraction. It seemed like something to get into, get involved with. It seemed fun. And there were guys that were doing it before me. I was very interested in the culture. Never really thought that it would become something that I would actually be doing for a living. When we got—when I got ready to graduate, we made a conscious decision to really be actively pursuing a career. We ended up, you know, getting our demo to Russell Washington, owner of Big Time Records, which was basically a record

store at the time. He heard the demo, really thought it could do something, so he put money behind it and put us out. And kind of the rest is, I guess as they say, history at this point.

[00:08:29] **Jesse Thorn:** Did you know other people who were making records and making money from making records?

[00:08:32] **Bun B:** Personally, no. Not at all. Obviously, I'm from the same town that Janis Joplin is from. So, there's obviously—there's an example.

[00:08:42] **Jesse Thorn:** (*Teasing.*) So, you knew her from middle school, of course.

[00:08:44] **Bun B:** Yeah, exactly. But again, these things are anomalies. She was an anomaly, being able to become who she became, coming from that very small environment, and quite frankly, so were we.

[00:08:53] **Jesse Thorn:** Could you see when you were 17 or 18 that you had—you know, that you really had something going for yourself? That you had talent brains that, you know, were of note?

[00:09:03] **Bun B:** I knew I wanted it more than pretty much everybody else around me. Right? Throughout my career, I met other people that were much more talented than me—right?—that should have gotten further than me, but very few of them were willing to work as hard as me. And that's always been, you know, a big part of me making it. I did not have 100% belief in myself that I would make it as a recording artist. I did have 100% belief that Pimp C—Chad—would make it as a recording artist. So, I just stuck next to him, right? Like, I was like, “I'm going to try this for a while. If it doesn't work, I'll go to college, and I'll try something else and, you know, go live life in that way.”

And there was no plan B for him. He had set his life up to where it was just music or nothing. You know? So, I knew he was going to give everything and push harder to make it, because in his mind he painted himself in a corner. So, I'm like, “I'm just going to stick with him, right? I know he's going to be busting his (*sensor beep*) trying to make it work. I got no problem with that. I'm down to bust my (*sensor beep*) too to make it work, but he's going to find a pathway. He's going to find some avenue to making an album and putting an album out. And I'm going to be sitting right next to him when he figures it out.”

[00:10:17] **Jesse Thorn:** I mean, I have a comedy partner I've been working with since I was 19, and sometimes people are like, “How—what is it about—that kept you together for 20 whatever years now?” And the truth is he's always been more talented than me, (*chuckles*) and he works his butt off. And I know, and I think he knows, that I will always show up, and I know that he will always show up. You know, like we've been different amounts of close as friends in our lives, but like I know he's there, and he's going to put in the work.

[00:10:51] **Bun B:** Absolutely. And once you understand that about somebody—like, that was a big thing for us. Like, for many years, we didn't live in the same city. You know? We didn't communicate often, but it was, “Hey man, we're booked this Friday. You need

anything from me? Any—you know, you want to go over the set list, or you want to change anything, pull something out, put something in?”

“Nah, I think we're good to go, you know.”

“Alright, I'll see you in Chicago. I'll see you in Atlanta on the weekend.”

And we'd show up and, you know, enjoy each other's company, get on stage, do exactly what needed to be done. Right? You'd see the camaraderie, the back and forth with each other, the rapport on stage, giving an amazing performance. And then, he would go back to living his individual life, and I would go back to living my individual life. You know, we had different friends, we lived different lifestyles. But just as you said, he knew that when it was time to record or perform or interview or show up for anything concerning the group, you know—

“You got the schedule, right?”

“Yep.”

“Alright. I'll see you there.”

There's no need to call somebody on the morning of, “Hey, you guys moving? What time to make it?” You don't even worry about that. I'm going to be there. You know what I'm saying? He's going to be there. We're going to make it happen.

[00:12:00] **Jesse Thorn:** I think that's particularly important if you're coming out of Port Arthur, Texas—or even Houston, Texas—and you know that the odds that you're going to put out a record and, you know, have a million seller out the gate are pretty modest. You know what I mean? (*Chuckles.*) Like—

[00:12:18] **Bun B:** But that was the thing, right? We knew—right?—if nothing else fails, that we were going to give everything we had, right? And there were times where his frustration with the process, with the industry, quite frankly not being paid for many years, like being in the red consistently—UGK's account is still in the red with Sony Records. We're still like \$2,000,000 in the hole. Now, in about another two years or so we will become what's known as a legacy act who was signed to Sony prior to 2000, and then your books are cleared. So, that's something that I get to look forward to in a couple of years.

But no, I mean, it was times where he wanted to quit, basically. And I kind of encouraged to keep—encouraged him to keep going. You know, it's bigger than him or me. It's really—it's the people, it's the fans, it's the movement and what we represent. And there were definitely times vice versa where he had to call me and kind of keep me going, you know. ‘Cause it was very frustrating to put out music that you knew sold, that you knew was connecting with people and just not being properly compensated for it because of contracts that you—at 18—your partner—at 17—and your CEO—at 24—had no idea what they were signing.

We had no idea what we were getting into. And it took years of amendments, right? And fights and whatnot to get a reasonable contract, like not even a proper contract, like just getting reasonable terms. It took literally 17 years to correct that mistake.

[00:13:51] **Jesse Thorn:** How old were the two of you when you met?

[00:13:53] **Bun B:** I'm a year older. I was a year older, so I would have been—I would have been 17. He would have been 16 when we met. We had a mutual friend, Mitchell Queen, and they—Pimp C and Mitchell Queen—were actually the first version of UGK, of Underground Kings. And then, we all became a group, and then all these things went through very different ways, and then eventually Pimp and I became a group. And we couldn't really—we had a four-man group called Four Black Ministers, and then it got down to two. And Two Black Ministers didn't have the same ring or pop to it.

And so, we kept trying to figure out the right name, which I was like, “Well, you know, that UGK name is still around.” And so—

[00:14:31] **Jesse Thorn:** Plus, like 1989 and 1990 were becoming 1991 and 1992. And maybe the Poor Righteous Teachers vibe was not hitting in the same way.

[00:14:39] **Bun B:** Oh, without question. No, no, without question. I'm so glad you brought that up, because I think that's a criminally underrated recording group. I think he's really one of the best—like, I don't want to say formula. I think Wise Intelligent might have been one of the most creative technical rappers of the '90s. I mean, his flow was just phenomenal. And yeah, that did definitely—you know, the whole idea of the acronyms and all of that stuff; we definitely come from that era. I mean, Bun B—you know, that's from the same time as Tommy T and Billy B and all that kind of stuff, you know. So, yeah, you could definitely—you know, I say certain names and certain phrases, and it'll definitely age me on this podcast.

(Jesse chuckles.)

But we believed, you know, and we went back. And this Underground Kings thing, it really fit us, because we always felt like we were fighting uphill, even when we had gold albums and debuting number one on the Billboard 200. You know, it all felt like almost too little, too late kind of a thing. It's like Denzel getting his Oscar for *Training Day* when he should have gotten it years ago for better work. Right? I felt like, you know, yeah, it's a good accolade to have. I mean, it looks pretty in a plaque on the wall, but I'm like—if cooler minds could have prevailed, both on our side and at the record company side, we could have had these accolades and this distinction years ago. But you know, everything happens at its own pace, I guess.

[00:16:02] **Jesse Thorn:** If you were 17 and he was 16, was one of you a big brother and the other a little brother?

[00:16:07] **Bun B:** Oh, absolutely. I was always the big brother in this situation. That was always the dynamic. But in terms of UGK—

[00:16:15] **Jesse Thorn:** I mean, Bun, you have big brother vibes.

[00:16:17] **Bun B:** Well, I mean, look, I've always been a little bit I guess mature for my age, based on my upbringing and—you know, when my parents divorced, it was kind of just me and my mom all the time. And my mom had to go to work. So, I was a latchkey kid for many years. And so, you had to really, you know, fend for yourself. You know, I was a feral kid, as they say, back then, just kind of out there trying to figure my way out in the world. And, you know, I didn't know about child abduction, and I was out all times at night and (*sensor beep*) like that, just wild (*sensor beep*) as a young kid.

And I had a little brother that died at birth. And so, I had always kind of longed for that. 'Cause I'm the baby boy of my family. And yeah, my partnership and eventually friendship and brotherhood with Pimp allowed me that dynamic. You know, but when it came to music and UGK, I wholeheartedly deferred to his opinion, his thought process, and his direction. Because I knew he understood that way better than I did. I didn't have anywhere near of an ear that Pimp had. He was a natural born artist—not musician, not rapper or writer. He was a natural born artist.

[00:17:25] **Jesse Thorn:** And you could tell that right away?

[00:17:26] **Bun B:** Very easily, very easily. He was much more focused and dedicated than teenagers were. Like, at 16 this kid had—I mean, he had equipment in his room, you know, like he was taking this (*sensor beep*) way more serious than I thought. You know, I was writing rhymes, rapping over instrumentals on—you know, on somebody's B side or something. This kid was actually like convincing his mom to buy him a sampler and a drum machine and four-track and actually trying to, you know, make music—not just make beats. He was trying to really produce music. All he ever lacked was equipment, right?

As we got older and became more seasoned and basically had a bigger budget, he eventually got everything he needed to create a body of work that was fully rounded and representative of what he wanted it to be. And it's our—it's a penultimate album for us now. It's the classic album, *Ridin' Dirty*. That was the first time he was afforded everything that he said, "I need to make a great album. You keep stopping me here and there. You don't get me this. And we can't get that. Give me this." We didn't—and we didn't take any money for *Ridin' Dirty*, right? He was like, "Just let me make the album. You know? We don't want—just rent us some equipment and give us some room." And we came up with what now is, you know, pretty much the quintessential UGK album, *Ridin' Dirty*.

[00:18:47] **Jesse Thorn:** Well, let's hear a little bit from a song from UGK's third album, *Ridin' Dirty*, from 1996. And this is my guest Bun B's verse on "Murder".

[00:18:57] **Music:** "Murder" from the album *Ridin' Dirty* by UGK.

Well, it's Bun B, and I'm the king of moving chickens

Not them finger-lickings, sticking together, that be tricking

You need a swift kicking, your— ripe for the picking

Now, as my pockets thicken, I'm deep-thinking— slicking

You sick when I be clicking, now take a look at the bigger—

Malt liquor swigger, player hater ditch digger

Figure my hair trigger, give a hot one in your liver

You shiver, shake, and quiver

I'm frivolous if a— didn't get wetter than a river

(Music fades out.)

[00:19:20] **Jesse Thorn:** Anyway, I hear that song, I hear “Murder”, I hear you rapping on it, and I'm like, “Oh, he worked hard on this.” *(Laughs.)*

[00:19:27] **Bun B:** I did not.

[00:19:29] **Jesse Thorn:** No?! *(Giggles.)*

[00:19:30] **Bun B:** I did not. I have to be very, very honest. I'll be very, very honest about this. So, for many years, if you listen to UGK's discography and our body of work, the majority of it is under, I'd say, maybe 78 BPM. A lot of it's very slow music, and it didn't really afford me a lot of opportunities to show my lyrical expertise, right? I can't really rap like a lot of words that show, you know, syllabic tones and metaphors and similes, and really encapsulate everything that I can visualize in my head into lyrical form and actually have other rappers be impressed by it with a beat that's slow. These beats are too slow.

And so, “Murder” as a song was literally designed for me to be able to be, “Okay, Bun B, this is it. Rap your *(censor beep)* off,” basically kind of a thing. Like—a couple of side notes. *Ridin' Dirty* as an album was recorded in the beta version of Pro Tools. So, we were literally the first rap group to record in Pro Tools, and I was the first rapper literally in a position to punch in on a verse. Right?

[00:20:40] **Jesse Thorn:** And that means rather than recording a verse all in one stream, rerecording certain portions of it or recording certain portions of a verse separately—sometimes down to a phrase or a word.

[00:20:53] **Bun B:** Yeah, yeah, just so you—‘cause sometimes maybe you don't have the breath control necessary to fully form and elocute everything you've written down in real time. Right? When you write things in your head, it seems like you can say those things in that time, because the mind works faster than the tongue. But I had it in my mind that I was not going to punch in, because I always felt I needed to be able to perform it in the booth,

because at some point I'm going to have to perform it in person. And if there's tricks involved in recording it in the booth, it's going to make it that much harder to perform it in person.

So, I was very much against punching in. Another thing is—the verse that you hear, this was take two. So, I did one take, and they were like, “You like it?”

And I was like, “Yeah, but let's—” Obviously, you always do another one for safety. Three, I was very hung over. I've only been hung over maybe four times in my life. And this was maybe time number two. And so, I came in the booth. I was very, very tired and just—it was very bright. So, I literally laid under the SSL board, 'cause it was like the darkest part in the room.

(Jesse laughs.)

And so, I laid under there, and then they—basically, they were tracking out the beat, which means that they were—when you track out a beat, every instrument and every vocal take has its own track. And so, each one of those has to be designated for every sound. And that used to take a while. It doesn't take as much time anymore, because it's almost all automated now. The computers do most of the work for you. But back then you still had to twist knobs, because as I said, this was the beta version. So, it still wasn't a fully formed version of Pro Tools. And so, while they're tracking it out, I'm asleep under them. Like, I'm knocked out. Then they wake me up and they're like, “Hey, are you ready to go?”

And I'm like, “Yeah, sure.” I write the rhyme. I go in. I rap it. I do a second take for safety. I come out, and I go right back under the board and go right back to sleep having no idea how impactful this verse would be first and foremost in Southern hip-hop. Because it's considered like the turning point of lyricism in the South. Because up until then, there were no examples of being Southern and lyrical combined, right? There was this thought that this high rapid speed lyricism was pretty much an East Coast thing. And they had perfected it. Not in the same way with Twista with double-time, but just a certain, you know, adamancy in the way you say the rhymes and aggressiveness and the nature of it.

And many, many artists have come to me and said like, “Yo, this is when I realized—” Because we all want to be considered as good as our contemporaries, right? I wanted to be able to go up to the Big Daddy Kanes of the world and the Kool G Raps and the KRS-Ones and have them be like, “Hey, you know what? You can actually really rap, my man.” You know? I wanted that, because back then you—no one was rich, right? Nobody was making any crazy money from rap. So, it was really just about how good you were at your craft. And so, this was my opportunity to finally show how good I was at my craft.

[00:23:58] **Jesse Thorn:** And then go back to sleep.

[00:23:59] **Bun B:** Yes. And then go back to sleep.

(Jesse chuckles.)

And then, encourage people to actually be like, “You know what? I can shoot for the stars on these type of things.” And you know, you see the TIs of the world—right?—and then the Killer Mikes of the world who have actually told me, “Man, you know, seeing you not only make this classic Southern music that we were all raised on, but also actually showing that you were good enough and skilled enough to rap against anybody let me know that the ceiling that I thought was finite is actually infinite, and you can really go as far as you would like to if you have the passion and the talent for it.”

[00:24:32] **Jesse Thorn:** You also have the instrument, though. I mean, like the first greatest Southern rapper ever is almost certainly Scarface.

(Bun agrees.)

And Scarface is never rappy-rappy. He's almost never doing anything about quick tongues. You know what I mean?

(Bun agrees.)

And what he has is a truly extraordinary voice and content that could only be conveyed by that voice, both him as a person and his instrument, right? Like, he raps about big feelings that can only be brought by a voice with that kind of gravitas and a crack in it, as well.

[00:25:14] **Bun B:** I mean, look, that's the—I think that's the proper term for him, is gravitas. And in, you know, the Southern hip-hop lexicon, he is rapper emeritus. He really is, you know.

[00:25:26] **Jesse Thorn:** But you, as an aspiring rappy-rap rapper, had to learn to use that big voice of yours on a slow record and give yourself the room to, you know, make yourself heard.

[00:25:41] **Bun B:** Well, I mean, I have to—you know, because of where I speak from and who I speak to and how I'm speaking, I have to be just as impactful and socially conscious and aware and thoughtful when I do a song like a “One Day” or a “High Life” in the same way that I have to deal in precision and acumen and vocabulary and tone and cadence and all of these different things when I get, you know—for lack of a better term, and I love it, because that's what we always say—rappy-rappy! You know what I'm saying? I have to want to be just as good at rapping well as I am saying songs that are well rapped, if that makes any sense. Like, when you go to these very deep topics about life and, quite frankly, death and how we emotionally deal in these things, you want to be as emotionally sound as possible. You don't need a bunch of words; you need the right words. You know what I'm saying?

Rappy-rap, you need a bunch of words, right? As many words as you can fit in, take up as much space as you can, don't leave any room for *(gasps in air)*, right? Like, that's kind of what it is. But when you do these very deep, you know, deeply thoughtful songs, you have to start with a deep breath, because we're about to get into some heavy *(censor beep)* right now. You know what I'm saying? But I think both of those are equally important for me. And quite

frankly, you know, we've walked through life with people. You know? We've tried to hold people's hands or there were little things that we spoke on that people actually reacted to and responded to. And then, as deeper, heavier (*sensor beep*) started to happen, we felt like, you know, somebody's got to talk to our people about what's going on. Like, we're the people with the frame of reference for this type of (*censored*). So, let's speak to it. You know?

And J Prince was always very adamant about—with the Geto Boys that, you know, we can do—we can talk about how tough we are and the environment we come from, and we can talk about women and dancing, but one song—at least one song—should attempt to speak about what's really going on and how we should be trying to change it. At least one song on your album should actually be something that's socially conscious about the world that we all live in. Because a lot of us in this hip-hop and music industry for the most part, but particularly in hip-hop, we operate in microcosms, right? Like, you know, I'm a rapper from New York, so this is the world I live in. I'm a rapper from Chicago, right?

And a lot of that is mutually exclusive, right? There's certain things that you have to navigate in New York that you maybe don't navigate the same way in Chicago, but then there's an overall kind of “the world is a ghetto” kind of theme that ties us all in together. So, I'll use a rappy-rap to speak specifically to myself, and I'll keep the deeper, more thoughtful stuff to speak about the environment and what I think people should really be aware of.

[00:28:37] **Jesse Thorn:** Let's hear a little bit of “One Day” from UGK’s record *Ridin’ Dirty* from 1996.

[00:28:43] **Music:** “One Day” from the album *Ridin’ Dirty* by UGK.

And then you're gone

This world we living in, man, it ain't nothing but drama

Everyone wanna harm you

In New York, brothers getting shot for bombers

Now they got your life in the palm of they hand like California

Players with dubs of hydroponic from Pomona

Gang-banging got the ghetto hotter than a sauna

Down in Orange, my boy Pots died on the corner

(Music fades out.)

[00:29:06] **Jesse Thorn:** Not a lot of rap songs about Pomona from non-Pomona rappers. There's a few great rappers from Pomona, don't get me wrong.

[00:29:12] **Bun B:** Oh, Suga Free, of course. But I mean, look, I try to draw—you know, it's all in an effort to try to incorporate more syllables to write, to rhyme words with. You know? But then I still have to put it in proper context, right? So, if I do say I'm going to rap Pomona—you know what I'm saying?—in a rhyme, I've got to make it make sense in the rhyme. I can't just say Pomona, you know what I'm saying? Like, I remember I had to put—I was trying to find things to rhyme with like show Shaka and Mo Prop, and I came up with Mo Rocca, the comedian.

(Jesse laughs.)

And I had to try to figure out how to make it make sense in a rhyme that I'm talking about Mo Rocca.

[00:29:53] **Jesse Thorn:** Well, who knew when you finished that Mo Rocca verse that it would become the theme to CBS Sunday Morning?

[00:30:00] **Bun B:** *(Laughs.)* Well, we operate with ABC over here at Trill Burgers, but that's a different story.

[00:30:06] **Jesse Thorn:** Let's take a quick break. When we come back, more with Bun B. Stay trill. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

[00:31:20] **Jesse Thorn:** This is *Bullseye*, I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is Bun B, of the Houston rap group UGK.

I want to play a song from your first solo record that's called *The Story*. This is a song that is the whole history of UGK.

[00:31:41] **Bun B:** Up until that moment, yes.

[00:31:43] **Jesse Thorn:** Yeah. And this is 2005.

(Bun confirms.)

And you wrote this song while Pimp C was in jail, right?

(Bun confirms.)

So, he had—it was a parole violation.

[00:31:53] **Bun B:** Yes. Yeah. He had a parole violation. And that's what he actually ended up having to go to prison for.

[00:31:59] **Jesse Thorn:** So, you are reflecting on this partnership.

[00:32:02] **Bun B:** I'm really just trying to put everything we've done in proper cultural context. 'Cause I'd never really looked at what we'd accomplished at that point. Everything for me was about moving forward, was about breaking ground, was about getting further, right? I'd never really stopped and looked back and realized, you know, how far we'd come and what we'd actually accomplished just by making it that far, right? Not even in terms of career or money or anything like that, just by beating the odds and actually making it that far.

[00:32:31] **Jesse Thorn:** You also, I would presume, hadn't had the opportunity to think about who you were without your partner and best friend. And in order to do that, you kind of had to figure out who you had been and who the two of you had been.

[00:32:44] **Bun B:** Well, I hadn't rapped by myself since high school. I had been in two other groups, technically, before I was in UGK. And once we became UGK and started making music as a group, as a tandem, I didn't see any reason why I needed to go off and make music by myself. Had Pimp C never gone to jail or never passed away, I would have had to have been forced into making a solo album. Strictly, for one, just based on the sheer responsibility of being responsible for every song, every verse—you know, sometimes every hook. Like, it was just a level of work that I did not consciously want to walk into.

Pimp made the majority of the music. He produced the majority of the music for the group. That by itself, alone, is very hard to try to replicate, much less go—in doing a solo album, I'm now responsible for picking every single beat that goes on this album. I had never had to do that before. That was never my job. So, there was a lot of the process of actually recording an album that I was not privy to and, even the stuff that I knew about, was not responsible for. Which now I'm responsible for every bit of it, and I'm really now at this point in the studio actually recording a solo album, really understand how much work it took to get here.

[00:34:11] **Jesse Thorn:** And I don't think you're only talking about the volume of effort that's involved. You're also talking about the fact that, as you said earlier, like you admired your friend and partner and admired his artistry and, in a way, deferred to his artistry on musical matters. I mean, you said that explicitly earlier.

[00:34:34] **Bun B:** Yeah, no, absolutely. To the point where we—okay, here's the first thing. We never—there was never a single argument that Pimp C and I ever had in a recording studio, because it was understood he knew better than me about that stuff. Right? All I ever had to do, Jesse, was show up, rap, and go home. As far as UGK is concerned. Like, literally. I showed up, I rapped, and I went home. And you gotta understand, we started in the tape age. We started with reels—right?—where everything took four to five times as long as it takes now, right? Technology has kind of caught up with the process. But back then it was tenuous, man. It was a lot of time that it took to make this stuff work, right? So, me laying vocals was probably an hour and a half of a 12-hour session. And he's responsible for the other ten and a half hours. Plus, he's got a rap too. You know?

So, I'd come in. I didn't have to be there when it started. I didn't have to be there when it ended. I just had to come in and do my part. Now, obviously, I'm there. I'm hanging out, we're kicking it, whatever, but if I felt like I needed to go somewhere or go do something, I

had no further responsibilities. All of that fell in my lap when he was in prison, right? And so, it's a lot. But at the same time, I'm like, "I gotta hold this (*censor beep*) down for him," because if I would've been doing a solo album and he was out, he would've been the one picking the music and doing all these things, right? And I just wanted to make an album that he would be proud of, right? I knew I could write the rhymes that would be necessary. I knew I could convey the emotion that needed to be necessary, but somebody had to pick these beats, right? And you always got to record more than you need, so you can kind of sift through and get the best of it.

So, not only do I have to record an album's worth of music without him, I got to record probably two albums worth of music, right? And differentiate which of this is the best—which he would always kind of pick out—how to sequence this, like what's the actual order—which was his thing. He would sit on that for like two weeks—right?—and consistently switch the order up and riot to it and come back and switch it up and riot to it and be like, "Okay, here's the balance. Here's the proper ebb and flow for this album to be easily consumed by people." You know, I had to do all of that stuff. And once we, you know, got into the process of actually doing it and realizing that it's going to be hard, but you can do it, I was like, "Alright, well, let's talk about it then, right? Let's talk about. Let's talk about all this (*censor beep*). Let's talk about everything. Let's lay it all out on the line."

And I wrote it all in one sitting. It took three takes. It was recorded in segments, and I can listen to it, and my wife can listen to it. And she can tell, because she was in there. It was literally me, the engineer, and my wife in the room, and it took everything just to record this song. It took everything emotionally in me just to actually say all of those things out loud, and we played it back, and we sat, and we cried. And I never listened to it again until it came out. And I still have only listened to "The Story" maybe five times in my life.

[00:37:32] **Music:** "The Story" from the album *Trill* by Bun B.

C.L. Butler, better known as Chad or Pimp C

The closest homeboy that I ever had

Now when we first met, we wasn't on the same page

From petty misunderstandings that got clearer with age

Two young boys who was ready to mash

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

[00:37:48] **Jesse Thorn:** Let's take a quick break. When we come back, more with Bun B. Stay trill. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

[00:37:56] **Music:** "The Story" by UGK.

... that we could do no wrong

Then hit the streets with a big bang

Them gangsta rhymes with that country twang

Dropped 'Tell Me Something Good', took off and went live

Next thing you know we was signing to Jive

(*Music fades out.*)

[00:38:52] **Promo:**

Music: Exciting, upbeat music.

Ify Nwadiwe: I'm Ify Nwadiwe, the host of *Maximum Film*.

Alonso Duralde: I'm Alonso Duralde, also the host of *Maximum Film*.

Drea Clark: And I'm Drea Clark, yet another host of *Maximum Film*. Every week, we hosts huddle up.

Ify: Usually with an illustrious guest.

Alonso: And we talk about films.

Ify: We have film news!

Alonso: We have film quizzes!

Drea: We answer your film questions!

Ify: It's like the maximum amount of film talk. That's why we call it—

All: (*In unison.*) *Maximum Film!*

(*Drea laughs.*)

Speaker: *Maximum Film*, the movie podcast that's not just a bunch of straight White guys. New episodes weekly, on MaximumFun.org.

(*Music fades out.*)

[00:39:29] **Jesse Thorn:** Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. If you're just joining us, my guest is Bun B. He's a co-founder of the Texas rap duo UGK, the Underground Kings. Alongside Pimp C, Bun helped craft the country rap genre. UGK was active until Pimp C died unexpectedly in 2007. Let's get back into our conversation with Bun B.

When I hear you talk about rapping, even now as a grown up 50-year-old man, I still feel like I hear you searching for your partner.

[00:40:05] **Bun B:** I'm leaving room, if that makes any sense. I'm leaving space. I do what I can do, and I don't put a lot of pressure on myself. But I constantly hear him always saying how good I was. And so, for me it's really about making sure I'm living up to my fullest potential for him, because I can almost dial it in, right? I can do just enough to get by, right? Me on a half day is better than most people on a full day, quite frankly, in terms of making—writing rhymes and doing this type of stuff. But I wouldn't be comfortable phoning these things in, because I knew he was watching. Now, there is a period after he passed away where I don't believe I was my full self in those songs, but I don't think that's me consciously holding back. I just don't think emotionally I was sound enough to kind of get back to where I was. It took a while. There's a period of years where I didn't make any music. Like, I didn't do any albums when I was teaching. And I used teaching almost as a refuge—right?—to still be a part of the culture and speak of the culture and live in the culture without having to deal with the pressure of contributing at the time, because it was just so much to bear.

And then my wife was like, “Okay, look, this—I understand that, you know, being able to teach and talk to the youth and share the culture is—you know, it's good for you. But like just cause you go to work in the daytime doesn't mean this is your day job. Like, at some point you got to go back. You got to go back in.”

And I told her quite frankly, “It's not fun anymore. I can do it, right? I can go in and technically record a song, but it's not fun anymore.”

She was like, “So, you got a lot of friends that make music. Who's the one you have the most fun with?”

Like, I don't know. I was like, “Right now, I don't know. K.R.I.T., probably?”

She's like, “Call K.R.I.T., tell him you want to make an album. And we'll just—when you feel comfortable, we'll go to Atlanta. We'll do some music. We'll come home. If you like it, we'll go back and do it.” And that's eventually how *Return of the Trill* came to be. It was sitting with him and getting a level of comfort with him in the studio to where he was like, “Okay, I'm going to produce for you, but then I also think you should be rapping to this guy's sound.” So, he didn't take the opportunity to just produce the whole thing. He wanted to make a record fully rounded, knowing my potential, right? So, it's like we don't have to make an album that's just this, because people know by now you can do more than this. So, let's explore that and see what makes sense.

And it really got me back into not just recording and making music, but then also being like, “Alright, what else can I rap to now?” Right? Because it was very rough rapping to music that wasn't his, and I was trying to consciously not chase that sound and make it look like I'm trying to recreate UGK music. I have to make music that's akin, right? I have to make music that's comparable, and I have to make music that makes sense to the people that have been following me up to this point. But it's obvious that at some point I've got to take a leap of faith and build my own sound. Right? Which I had never even thought of, because even with doing the solo album when he was locked up. It was like, “Okay, I'm gonna do this. He's

gonna come home, and we'll get back to it.” Right? Which we did, but very short—you know, very short time of actually getting back to it.

And so, against everything, I had to really get out there and really fully form who I was going to be from that point on. And once I committed to it, I got a lot more comfortable doing it. And now I'm back, you know, doing a bunch of features like I was in the early 2000s again. And a lot of it, quite frankly Jesse, is cathartic. I record it, and it's like, “You know what, if it comes out now, cool. If not like I'm not really worried.” I can create music and release music, and it'll monetize, right? I'll make money off of it. I'm not going to get rich off of any of this stuff anymore, but I can still, you know, feed the base, right? I can, you know, still give them music. But they still—they want to go back. Right? They want to go back. “This new stuff is cool, and it's good to see you still do the music and stuff like that, but, man, I want to listen to that (*sensor beep*) you made when I was in college. You know what I'm saying? I want to listen to that (*sensor beep*) you made when I had my first job. Or when—you know, driving home from school.” Because there's so many different people that have, you know, joined the ride at different times in life. And so, hearing those older songs bring them back to those moments.

And that's kind of what my concerts are. They're a representation of reflection. Right? When you go to the old school show, you don't go there to see the old school dudes, you know, trying to do what the new guys are doing, right? You want to see guys that are very comfortable in their skin. That's hopefully what the crowd in the audience is. And you're like, “You know what? There's no kids tonight. There's no grandkids tonight. You know, and we got to get out of here by 11 o'clock, 'cause these knees don't work too good after 12. And we're all on that same page. And let's--alright, now let's take it back to '95.” And we do stuff from super tight. “Let's take it back to '96, and let's take it back to '98.” And all of that type of stuff. And, you know, we just create a space, a shared space, where we're all comfortable reflecting on the younger versions of ourselves without regret.

[00:45:09] **Jesse Thorn:** There's a great Devin the Dude song called “What a Job”, and Andre3000 has a verse on there where he says, “We do it for that boy that graduated, that looked you in your eyes real tough, said, ‘Appreciate it,’ and that he wouldn't have made it if it wasn't for your CD number nine, and he's standing with his baby mama, Kiki, and she's crying, talking about they used to get high to me in high school. Used to make love to me in college.”

[00:45:31] **Bun B:** It's so real. It's so real.

[00:45:34] **Jesse Thorn:** That you are a part of people's lives.

(*Bun confirms.*)

The movement of their lives, the texture of their lives.

[00:45:40] **Bun B:** Whether you realize it or not, you know what I'm saying? I've had the blessing to actually be out here and tour for 31 years, going back to Dallas over a hundred times. Going to Jackson, Mississippi over 60 times. Birmingham 80 times, right? Lake Charles—god, 150 times. All these different places. I've met promoters who, when I met

them, their son was five. I go back, the family still owns the club. The son runs the club now. We all grow together. I have kids. I have grandchildren now. The majority of the people that were in the club with me when I was 19 partying, the majority of them have them too. You know?

And it takes a lot for me to get out of bed in the morning, just like it does for them. I got to make sure that responsibilities are taken care of before I can go to that club, just like them. We're not trying to be these people all day anymore. None of us are, right? But it's okay for us to come together and remember when we didn't have these responsibilities that we have now. And obviously, you got to call a nanny or call the kid. "Hey, look, I know I said I was going to watch the grandkids this weekend, but Bun B's in town. So, I can't do it this weekend. You're going to have to figure it out." You know, it's good to get back to you, you know? 'Cause as you get older, and you become a parent, life stops really being about you, and you stop being very selfish in that way, you know. But people still need to be who they are. People still need to feel like I'm not just who I am and important when my kids are around, and my grandkids are around; I'm important by myself. It's good for me to do things for me too. You know, every now and then.

Did I make a whole life about me? You know, my life at this point now, at 50 years old, is absolutely about my family. It's about my legacy and what I leave behind—not only physically, but emotionally and spiritually. With my grandkids now, it's so funny. My grandkids are like—initially it's like, "Oh wow!" Because I took them to concerts, and they see all these people and all of that stuff. But they see very little of that. They've been with me long enough to know that that's like a very, very small part of who I am. Like, "That's what my grandpa does, but that's not who my grandpa is." That to me is the most important part of my life right now is showing them who I am as a person and making sure that when I'm gone, people will walk up to them and try to explain to them about hearing "Murder" in college and all that stuff. But at the end of the day, I need people to be able to tell them, "Hey, I don't know how much you know about your grandfather, but he was a good man."

That's it. That's job well done for me.

[00:48:18] **Jesse Thorn:** A lot of people lost a lot of people in the pandemic.

(Bun confirms.)

There were two rappers who passed away that were particularly important to me, because they were people that I admired when I was a teenager. When I was first starting in this business, two of the first people I ever interviewed—Gift of Gab from Blackalicious and Zumbi from Zion I.

(Bun "wow"s.)

Two Bay Area or Northern California hip-hop legends.

(Bun agrees.)

And seeing them pass away and then seeing, you know, Shock G and Biz Markie and on and on and on over the last few years—you realize both that, you know, none of these men are old men or were old men. But you realize both that these are people who are passing into middle age and in some cases older, but also that the hip-hop community, by virtue of its—you know, its ethnic and cultural composition in the United States is particularly vulnerable to early death.

(Bun agrees.)

And I imagine that both with your experience with your partner having passed away and now with getting into your 50s in the aftermath of a horrific pandemic, that can't be too far from your mind.

[00:49:41] **Bun B:** I've been dealing in mortality since 2007. I've been operating every day with the assumption that obviously you're going to die, but you—and you don't know when, but it will probably be sooner than you're ready for it. And it's just about preparing my family for life without me, you know. And I'm prepared to go. I'm consciously trying to provide more of a cushion for the family, but I feel like I presented myself to everyone around me, and there's nothing more I could do to show what kind of a man I am and who I am and what I'm worth and what I care about and where my heart is. And so, you know, we'll just—we'll be here, and we'll do what we can for people. You know, we've become a lot more charitable lately, you know. And it's not just about giving a bunch of money to things, but like being more involved.

And that's a big part of my grandkids seeing me in that space, right? Knowing that their grandfather was compassionate to people. He was caring. He actually was concerned about the conditions of people around him, did what he could to help improve the world while he was here. That's—me being famous, that's old at this point, right? My granddaughter is 14. It doesn't matter how famous I am. She does not want me like dropping her off and picking her up or whatever. Like, there's a lot of times where like, “No, Pawpaw, I'm fine,” kind of a thing. You know? So, yeah, if we're on the human side of this now, then let's humanize it as much as possible, and then show exactly what a human being should be and how they should move.

That's kind of where I'm at right now, because I know a lot of people follow my lead and look at my example. And we've done all that with music, right? So, we've got to do that with character. Now we've got to do that with character.

[00:51:24] **Jesse Thorn:** Well, Bun, I sure appreciate all this time. It's always great to get to talk to you. A real honor.

[00:51:30] **Bun B:** No, man, I love having these very pure, honest moments of vulnerability based on where I come from and what I represent. And so, I'm glad that if there are leads that people take for me in my life, being vulnerable and being strong enough to be open with people is something that I hope that many, many people learn to do before they're gone.

[00:51:54] **Jesse Thorn:** Bun B. Always a joy to get to talk to one of the sharpest guys in the entire hip-hop world and one of the greatest MCs of all time. If you haven't listened to Bun's

records, I can't recommend them enough. If you want to start with maybe a UGK album, *Ridin' Dirty* is about as good as it gets. And if you're in the Houston area, Bun B has a brand-new Smashburger stand called Trill Burgers. So, go get those burgers on Shepherd Drive, open 11 to 9 every day. I know where I'm eating the next time I'm in Houston.

[00:52:29] **Transition:** Cheerful synth.

[00:52:32] **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. I thought I got rid of these stupid moths that were eating my clothes, but it turned out I didn't. I'm really mad about it.

This show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producers are Jesus Ambrosio and Richard Robey. Our production fellow here at Maximum Fun is Bryanna Paz. We get booking help from Mara Davis. Our interstitial music is by the great DJW, also known as Dan Wally. Our thanks to the folks at Houston Public Media, KUHT, for hosting the great Bun B. Bun's in there regular enough that everybody knew him. Everyone was like, "Oh, nice to see you again, Bun!" It's great. I mean, wouldn't you be happy to see him? Our theme song is called "Huddle Formation", written and recorded by The Go! Team. Thanks to them, and thanks to Memphis Industries, their label.

Go follow us on Instagram, [@BullseyeWithJesseThorn](#). See pictures of folks who roll through the studio and how we do what we do and who's coming up on the show and all that kind of stuff. [@BullseyeWithJesseThorn](#) on Instagram. And I think that's about it. Just remember, all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

[00:53:47] **Promo:** *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of [MaximumFun.org](#) and is distributed by NPR.

(Music fades out.)