

[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.

(Music fades out.)

[00:00:13] **Music:** “Huddle Formation” from the album *Thunder, Lightning, Strike* by The Go! Team—a fast, upbeat, peppy song. Music plays as Jesse speaks, then fades out.

[00:00:21] **Jesse Thorn:** It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. This month on our show, we are gonna be doing something a little bit different. We are ringing in 50 years of hip-hop by interviewing all rappers all month. And we're kicking things off with, in my opinion, the greatest ever to do it: Rakim. I think there is a line between what you might call early hip-hop and modern hip-hop and that line—well, I say it's a line. It's basically a guy, Rakim.

(Music fades in.)

Take a listen to “Five Minutes of Funk”, which is a great song from 1984 by the rap group Whodini.

[00:01:00] **Music:** “Five Minutes of Funk” from the album *Escape* by Whodini. The music continues under the dialogue.

[00:01:10] **Jesse Thorn:** The MC there is Jalil Hutchins and listen to his flow.

[00:01:16] **Music:** “Five Minutes of Funk” by Whodini.

Now, the party didn't start 'til I walked in

And I probably won't leave until the thing ends

But in the meantime, the in between time

If you work your thing, then I'll work mine

We came here together so we could have fun

Me and you baby, going one on one

Now this is the last chance for us to get off

So either get loose, or you ought to get lost

(Music fades out.)

[00:01:34] **Jesse Thorn:** The rhymes hit with the snare drum. 1, 2, 3, 4. I mean, that is a classic style, and it's that way pretty much throughout all the titular “Five Minutes of Funk”. And again, not a bad song—actually, a great song. It's just back then that's kind of how most rap songs went. Now, fast forward three years. This is “I Ain't No Joke” by Eric B and Rakim. Rakim is the rapper here, and it's very, very different.

[00:02:10] **Music:** “I Ain't No Joke” from the album *The Archive: Live, Lost & Found* by Eric B and Rakim.

They think that I'm a new jack but only if they knew that

They who think wrong are they who can't do that

Style that I'm doing, they might ruin

Patterns of paragraphs based on you and

Your off-beat DJ, if anything he play sound familiar

I'll wait 'til E say, "Play 'em"

So I'ma have to diss and broke

You could get a smack for this, I ain't no joke

(Music fades out.)

[00:02:31] **Jesse Thorn:** Look, this is a rap about rapping. The subject matter isn't exactly revolutionary, and Rakim was barely old enough to vote when he put this down. But when you hear it, the complexity, the rhythm, the flow, it is both intricate and effortless. The rhymes flit between the abstract and the concrete, metaphor and reality, in mind-bending ways. Ask any rapper or any aspiring rapper who was alive at the time, and they will tell you this changed their life. And you know what? It still sounds great more than 30 years later.

I've got so much to get into with Rakim, how he met Eric B, how they met Marley Marl, how Rakim looks back on his entire career now that he is a man in his 50s. And I don't wanna waste any more of your time before we get into it.

(Music fades in.)

So, let's kick things off with another classic from Eric B and Rakim: “Don't Sweat the Technique”.

[00:03:40] **Music:** “Don't Sweat the Technique” from the album *Don't Sweat the Technique* by Eric B and Rakim.

Don't sweat the technique

Let's trace the hits and check the file

Let's see who bit to detect the style

I flip the script so they can't get foul

At least not now, it'll take a while

I change the pace to complete the beat

I drop the bass 'til MCs get weak

For every word they trace, it's a scar they keep

'Cause when I speak, they freak to sweat the technique

(Music fades out.)

[00:04:09] **Jesse Thorn:** Rakim, Welcome to *Bullseye*. I'm so happy to have you on the show.

[00:04:12] **Rakim:** Thanks so much, man. Thanks for the welcome mat.

[00:04:14] **Jesse Thorn:** I'm very genuinely thrilled. So, you grew up in Long Island, which—you know, at the time that you were growing up, could have felt pretty far from the beginnings of hip-hop.

[00:04:26] **Rakim:** Yeah, indeed so.

[00:04:27] **Jesse Thorn:** Did it feel like it was coming from a long way away?

[00:04:30] **Rakim:** Yeah, I always felt like I was on the outside looking in, you know? Knowing—and also knowing the speed of things in the inner city compared to living in Long Island. You know? I knew they had the advantage and all the resources right there. So, it was definitely hard trying to I guess make your mark, you know.

[00:04:55] **Jesse Thorn:** Did you first hear hip-hop like on the radio?

[00:04:57] **Rakim:** Nah. Um, growing up in Wyandanch as a young kid, there was always DJs in the park, block parties, and even my brother used to have parties at the house. Luckily, my brother knew the DJs personally, so they used to bring their equipment over to the house and sometimes let him hold it for a week or two. So, I was always around it, fortunately at a very young age. I was listening to hip-hop before the first rap record came out—"King Tim

III”, Fatback Band. I remember sitting in the basement with my brother and his friends, one of them a DJ—Paul Gerard. His name was DJ Maniac. And I remember the day he came to the house and told my brother, “Wait ‘til you hear this. Wait ‘til you hear this.” And he gets downstairs and puts on “King Tim III”. And that's the first record we heard with rap on it.

[00:05:54] **Jesse Thorn:** You were the youngest of five. Is that total? Is that right?

(Rakim confirms.)

So, you had two older brothers and two older sisters.

(Rakim confirms.)

Were they into hip-hop or were they into other stuff?

[00:06:06] **Rakim:** Well, luckily my two sisters sang, my two brothers played instruments. My oldest brother, Ronnie, played keyboards, and he was able to play other instruments and write music. And my brother Stevie, he played the saxophone. And I tried to do everything Stevie did. So, I wound up playing the saxophone as well.

[00:06:28] **Jesse Thorn:** What kind of music did they like?

[00:06:29] **Rakim:** Well, going to the top, moms and pops played all kind of good R&B and jazz music. Man, I remember, you know, being a young kid and hearing so much jazz and—you know, I liked it. You know what I mean? And I remember being a young kid trying to understand jazz, 'cause the first thing I understood was like the timing was different. R&B was, you know, mostly 4:4 time—1, 2, 3, 4, 2, 2, 3—you know, all the way up to four, and then, you know, we start back over. But jazz, the timing in jazz, I remember listening to it like, you know, just noticing right away that the time and the rhythms was different and very intricate. And I think that's what gave me a profound understanding of time and space. I felt 4:4 time was very easy and the rhythms that I was hearing in jazz records was, you know, what I was trying to emulate.

[00:07:37] **Jesse Thorn:** Your sort of auntie who like babysat you was Ruth Brown, one of the greatest R&B singers of all time.

[00:07:46] **Rakim:** Yes, incredible.

[00:07:46] **Jesse Thorn:** And when I say R&B singers, I mean, I'm talking about the—from the dawn of R&B, when R&B was rhythm and blues. So, she was sort of pre rock and roll, pre soul music, R&B singer, early '50s she started having hit records. She was such a big star at the peak of her career that—she was a star throughout her life, you know what I mean? Like she worked.

(Rakim confirms.)

Were you aware of that when you were a kid?

[00:08:15] **Rakim:** Yes. What's crazy is I remember sitting there watching her, and it could be a normal day—you know, nine times out of ten, I wouldn't know what was going on in her life. If I—you know, just watched her. Meaning, you know, a normal day she would get up, watch TV, relax. She had her favorite snacks. She loved Slim Jims.

(Jesse laughs.)

(Inaudible.) And I remember—yeah, 'cause I used to steal them. She used to have them all around the house. I remember sitting there watching her, and it'd be a normal day. And then, she would get up, go in her room, go in the closet, grab like a top shawl or something. Right? She would throw it on this big table that she had where she did a lot of her clothes at, right? She would throw it on there. She'd walk around the house. She would do something. She might sit down and watch a little more TV. Then she would grab some glue, right? She would go over to the shawl she just laid on this table, and she'd take the glue and just squirt the glue all over the shirt. Let that sit for a minute. She would get this glitter, come back, throw the glitter on the shirt. Let that dry. She would shake it off. And I'm sitting there watching her make an outfit glow. She'll buy some regular, you know, nice stuff in the store, but she'll decorate it to make it look stage worthy.

So, I'm sitting there watching her. She might, you know, glitter up pants or a big hat, whatever she's doing. She'd sit back down, watch TV, eat her snacks. And me, not knowing that she has a show that night. So, you know, I started figuring out like, you know, her movements. Like, whenever I seen her starting to get clothes ready and put glue and glitter and all of this stuff on it, I knew she had a show that night. But she was so laid back and so down to earth, you would never know. She never showed like any kind of, you know, nervousness or—I guess she was the same person getting ready for the show and preparing for the show, you know, that I seen babysitting me. So, you know, it was a blessing watching that, man. You know, it let me know how to prepare for a show. You know, keep a cool state of mind and, you know, stay calm, relax, do what you normally do, and get ready for the task at hand. But it was a blessing, man, to just be able to watch her, man.

[00:10:43] **Jesse Thorn:** That's something that kind of goes three ways. I mean, it is like—first of all, somebody in show business is a normal human being. That's one of the things. Number two, it's somebody in show business is glittering and glamorous. You know, she's making—she's got glitter on the big hat, right?

[00:11:06] **Rakim:** Facts. Facts.

[00:11:07] **Jesse Thorn:** And number three is the thing that's in between those two, which is that in order for her to transform herself into the glamorous stage presence that I'm sure she was—you know, it's a pretty like straightforward thing to be gluing glitter to your clothes, you know what I mean? Like, it's not like she went to Bulgari and had them in encrust things in crystal, right?

(Rakim agrees.)

It's like you are getting that glamor through the most quotidian work that there is. You just—some glue and some glitter.

[00:11:40] **Rakim:** Right, right. And just seeing, you know, how creative she was. You know what I mean? Like, you know, singing and having stage presence and all, that's one thing. But being able to kind of create your own outfit before you get on stage—you know, it just shows the different dimensions of, you know, who she was. And you know—and it's funny, you know what I mean? I do the same thing. I might have something that I'm wearing at night, and maybe the hat don't match everything perfectly. You know, I got a Yankee hat, you know, it got a white Yankee sign, but I need a red Yankee sign. So, I break out the Sharpie and make the, you know, sign red. So, it's almost like when you're on stage and you improvise, and it's the same thing, man. So, you know, like—you know, I need to match this up. I paint Timberlands, I paint Nikes. Everything. And it's the same thing she was doing.

[00:12:40] **Jesse Thorn:** You always did that, right? You were painting sneakers when you were a kid, like a teenager.

[00:12:45] **Rakim:** Yes, sir. Yes, sir. Back in high school. It's funny, when I met Biz Markie, that's one of the things we vibed about. He used to always come up to my school with different painted sneakers, and I remember the first time—like, he didn't know I painted them too. But the first time he had on a brown and black pair of Adidas. So, I looked at them. I was like, “Yo, those is crazy.” And they was done nice too, nice and neat. I said, “Yo, those crazy, Biz. Where you get them from, man?”

He said, “My pops own the sneaker store in Long Island.” Something like that. You know what I mean? But later on, I told him I knew. I said, “Come on, man, you painted those. They don't make brown Adidas with black stripes, bro.” I said, “Come on.”

So, we used to laugh. But yeah, man, you know. Trying to, number one, be original, unique, and try to have something that nobody else can get their hands on. So, I think that painting sneakers was kind of, you know, the start of me being original and trying to stand out.

[00:13:46] **Jesse Thorn:** More still to come with Rakim. Stay with us. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

[00:13:53] **Transition:** Thumpy rock music.

[00:13:58] **Jesse Thorn:** Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn, if you're just joining us, my guest is the rapper Rakim. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, he changed the way rappers rap in a way that no other MC ever has. Let's get back into our conversation.

There used to be a thread on this discussion board for DJs and crate diggers, called Soul Strut. It was just like dozens and dozens and dozens of people sharing stories of primarily getting woken up in the middle of the night by a phone call from Biz Markie, who they had never met before.

(*Rakim laughs.*)

But somebody gave Biz their phone number, and him just asking them what kind of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles they have. *(Laughs.)*

[00:14:45] **Rakim:** Yeah. Yeah. Biz was a big kid, man. He loved toys. He loved—you know, his energy, man. Like, I remember being around Biz, and he made you love rap more. You know what I mean? Looking for records or record shopping, he made you want to do that better than everybody else. Like, you know, the energy that he had, man, you know, was just always high energy. Loved hip-hop and loved the fact that he was a part of it, and he knew everybody that was in it, man. I mean, you know, just—you know, RIP to Biz, man.

[00:15:21] **Jesse Thorn:** How did the two of you meet?

[00:15:22] **Rakim:** We met out in Long Island at my high school. Um, it's funny, I don't know how he found out about the school, but he came up to the school one day and came to the back of the school where the cafeteria area is, where everybody's kind of hanging out and was doing a beatbox. And somebody ran over to me like, “Yo, what's this dude over here doing a beatbox?”

So, I run to the back of the hallway where the cafeterias are. And you know, before I get there I can hear, you know, his voice, you know, illuminating through the hallways. And I'm like okay. 'Cause people played around with the beatbox around my way. It wasn't nobody that good, you know what I mean? So, right away I knew that this kid knew what he was doing. So, I get over to him. He got the Adidas on, the shell tops. He got baggy jeans on. He got the cap on, and he rocked the beatbox. So, of course, I start rhyming. And you know, the rest was history, man. After that, we start chopping it up. He was telling me, you know, a little bit of his background and what he do, and it went from that to the sneakers and the whole thing, man.

And we just kept in touch. He would come out to Long Island and come straight to the school. And it got so crazy. Like, for a little while, the security guards would let him in. And then, it got so crazy, 'cause people would—you know, we was drawing too much attention that they had to stop him from coming up to the school. But you know, it was dope, man. I remember he was like, “Yo, Ra, it's a MC battle convention in Manhattan, 127th Street.”

Now, at this time, you know, I'm in Long Island. I'm maybe 10th grade, maybe? You know, I wouldn't pick up and go to a show in New York and get on the mic. So, basically like, “Yeah, it's a convention.”

I'm like, “Yeah. So, what's you—”

He was like, “Yo, you should join you. You should enter.”

I'm like, “Yo, man, I'm not entering no battle in Harlem, man.”

He was like, “You'll ride, man. Yo, you good. You nice, man.”

So, he talked me into it, and that's what I mean about Biz. Like, he just made you love whatever you thought you liked. You know, Biz let you know, “No, no, no, let’s just—yo, let's go. You’re going to be good. They’re gonna go crazy when they hear you.” And like I said, we went. It was an event put together by the Crash Crew. It was maybe 1985. I remember Doug Fresh was there. I think Melle Mel was there. But I remember, I got on to perform, and people gave me a good response. It was a brother from the neighborhood, named Kid West, that won. He was basically two blocks over, so everybody kind of knew him, but he was nice. And I learned a lot that night. But I definitely gained a lot of confidence, because I didn't know that I would do that good in Harlem, New York City, you know what I mean? The place that I knew held the bar on what I was trying to do.

[00:18:24] **Jesse Thorn:** There's tapes of you and Biz performing when you're teenagers.

[00:18:30] **Rakim:** Yeah, what about them?

[00:18:31] **Jesse Thorn:** The first question I guess I have is why are there tapes of you? Like, who had the sense to be like we should record this?

[00:18:40] **Rakim:** Yeah, we—you know, everybody was in love with hip-hop. Everybody was kind of playing their part. You had, you know, rappers that would write rhymes before a party, you know, preparing. And you also had the cats who’d be like, “Yo, I'm gonna make sure I record this, 'cause, you know.” I think it was DJ Bilal in Long Island that recorded a lot of those, man. But we was making a little noise in the neighborhood, so, you know, we was kind of popular, man.

[00:19:10] **Jesse Thorn:** Let's hear a little bit of my guest, Rakim—at the time known as Kid Wizard—rapping, with Biz Markie beatboxing.

[00:19:18] **Clip:** A fuzzy recording of Kid Wizard and Biz Markie.

... (inaudible) without one gap

If you don't to me, you're gonna fall in the trap

Oh yeah, what do you need with the life of a pimp

One who knows the rhyme (inaudible)

Got a head so heavy, you can almost (inaudible), Rakim

Take seven MCs, throw them in a line

Add seven more brothers who think they can rhyme

It'll take another seven before I (inaudible)

At the same time

Biz Markie...

[00:19:49] **Jesse Thorn:** That's so great to hear.

[00:19:52] **Rakim:** (*Chuckles.*) That's crazy, man. That's crazy.

[00:19:54] **Jesse Thorn:** What's wild is you're—I mean, I guess you're probably like 16 or something like that. You sound like a real pro. You don't sound like you sound—you know—a year or two later when you started recording, but you sound like I could have fun at that party. You know what I mean?

[00:20:12] **Rakim:** Word up, man. I guess listening to Grandmaster Caz and Melle Mel and Kool Moe Dee, you know, those is my teachers, man. And just being a big fan of hip-hop. You know, I tried to get my hands on all the cassette tapes that I could that was going around the neighborhood from the early Grandmaster Flash and, you know, Cold Crush Brothers, Fantastic Five. And just learning from them. You know, I had an idea how I was supposed to sound, but I think—not until I knew I was gonna make a record. It all kind of came together, man. All of these things was preparing me for the moment, but I definitely think I made a quantum leap from there to, you know, the first records that we did. You know, it just let me know like the whole world was gonna listen, and I had to come correct. And that style came together.

[00:21:15] **Jesse Thorn:** To my ear—I mean, like Kool Moe Dee is kind of like the bridge between that first wave of great rappers and the wave that, you know, you and Big Daddy Kane sort of headlined. And that, you know, there was—rapping for a long time was, you know, (*rhythmically*) ba-bababa-baba-baba-ba or similar, right? It was just like let's have some fun up here, and the loop from “Good Times” is playing.

[00:21:43] **Rakim:** Facts. (*Chuckles.*)

[00:21:44] **Jesse Thorn:** And—which nothing wrong with that. That's great. Like, it's legit great. You know, you could put on those Sugar Hill greatest hits CDs right now, and we would all have a great time.

[00:21:56] **Rakim:** No doubt, no doubt.

[00:21:57] **Jesse Thorn:** But Kool Moe Dee sort of started to investigate the possibilities of, you know, what if there were more internal rhymes? What if the meter was a little bit more than just the 1, 2, 3, 4 that you described? How did you get the idea that it should be a lot more than just that 1, 2, 3, 4?

[00:22:24] **Rakim:** Uh, I think my background, you know, listening to a lot of different music. And like I said that jazz music gave me a better understanding of time and space. One day I was downstairs and a John Coltrane, you know, record was playing downstairs in my mother's—mother and father's basement. And for some reason, as soon as it came on, I was

stuck to the record, and I remember not moving. I sat there. I was sitting in front of the shelves where their records are, and I used to often just look at certain album covers when, you know, they was playing music. But this day I remember when the record came on, I was kind of just gazing at like the ground. The record started playing, and I was hooked from the first note to the last.

The record went off, and I was like almost exhausted. Like, you wanted to cut the record back on, or like you didn't know what to do after the record, you know, went off. The first thing that stuck to me when the record went off, it was like, "Wow, I don't think he played the same melody twice." And that's where I got my style from. I said, "I'm not gonna repeat a cadence and a rhyme twice." So, my first albums, you know, you would never hear me, you know, repeat a cadence. It was, you know, one bar, maybe two bars, and then the next cadence was something totally different. But I was trying to do that purposely because of the way I felt when the John Coltrane record went off. So, I was trying to get that same effect—almost when the record goes off that the listener's, you know, out of breath.

[00:24:02] **Jesse Thorn:** So, in the early days of rap when you were a 10-year-old, a lot of rappers were—you know, they had their notebook, and it was like a collection of fun stuff to fill the time and get the audience excited.

[00:24:16] **Rakim:** Facts.

[00:24:17] **Jesse Thorn:** And you know, that's why like the guys who recorded "Rapper's Delight" could go borrow some rhymes from somebody else, right? Because it was all just fun stuff about having fun. From the moment you appeared on record, you were doing something very different. There were people doing other things. You know, Melle Mel had a lot of songs that were songs.

[00:24:43] **Rakim:** Right, facts.

[00:24:44] **Jesse Thorn:** But when you got into the studio, even as an 18-year-old, like—I mean, there's a famous story that Marley Marl—who's, you know, one of the most significant figures in the history of hip-hop—just didn't get it. (*Laughs.*) Just was not into it, I guess.

[00:25:05] **Rakim:** Yeah, word up. Word up. Word up, man.

[00:25:06] **Jesse Thorn:** Was that like Biz invited you over and—

[00:25:09] **Rakim:** Yeah. Nah, actually, Eric B, a friend of mine—Alvin Todi brought Eric B to my house, and Eric B comes in the house and said, "I know Mr. Magic and Marley Marl. And I'm looking for a rapper to make a record." So, me and Eric B went to Marley's house. But around that time, I was—like I said before, I was kind of like creating my style, shaping my style, you know, like knowing what I wanted to do and how I wanted to sound. For the most part, I was always a laid-back person, man. So, when I get to Marley's house, I'm still that, you know, young kid from Long Island. I'm not 100% confident on what I'm doing, not sure if the great Marley Marl definitely, you know, was going to like what I was doing.

So, I got a lot of strikes against me. So, I'm there. We start recording. It gets to the end of the verse. He stops the track, and he was like, "Alright, yo, we gonna, um, take it to the top."

(Music fades in.)

He said, "I like the way it sounds, but put a little more energy into it."

So, I'm like, alright. I go back to the beginning. It comes on, and it's the melody. So, it's *(rhythmically)*, "Turn up the bass, check out my melody. Hand out a cigar."

[00:26:29] **Music:** "My Melody" from the album *Paid in Full* by Rakim and Eric B.

Turn up the bass

Check out my melody

Hand out a cigar

I'm letting knowledge be born

And my names the R-A-K-I-M

Not like the rest of them

I'm not on a list

Catch what I'm saying

I drop lines like a...

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

[00:26:39] **Rakim:** Anyway, he plays it again. This time he stops at halfway. He was like, "Yo, maybe if you stand up." 'Cause I'm sitting on his couch. He had his little studio set up in his couch. He said, "Maybe if you stand up, it'll be a little more." So, now I'm kind of understanding, you know, really what's going on.

But you know, I said, "Marley, I could stand on the couch, but it's gonna sound same."

[00:27:03] **Music:** "My Melody" by Rakim.

Turn up the base

Check out my melody

Hand out a cigar

I'm letting knowledge be born

And my name's the R...

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

[00:27:09] **Rakim:** I didn't wanna change my style. I know how I sound. I know what suited me better.

[00:27:16] **Music:** "My Melody" by Rakim.

Has the mic often distorting, ready to explode

I keep the mic at Fahrenheit

Freeze MCs, then make 'em colder

The listener's system is kicking like solar

As I memorize, advertise like a poet...

(Music fades out.)

[00:27:27] **Jesse Thorn:** So, if I was gonna say to somebody that wasn't a big hip-hop head what is the thing that Rakim brought to the game? Why is Rakim one of the greatest rappers of all time, if not the greatest? Like, I think it would be easy to just say like, oh, you know, lyricism, right? Like, everybody's rapping about partying, and Rakim is rapping about knowledge of self. And that's true. But to me the greatest distinction is about flow, that the sound of you rapping was so dramatically different from the rappers who went before you—including the great rappers who went before you. How did you build that? Like, we heard the inspiration for that was, you know, you sit down, and you hear "My Favorite Things" by John Coltrane or whatever, and you think, "What if it could be something else?" But like, how did you build it? Were you, you know, writing out the meter in your book? Were you trying line by line on stage? Like, how did you make it?

[00:28:28] **Rakim:** I think the main thing I used to try to do was dissect the music or the beat that I was writing to. I love melodic samples, because I'm able to hear other things in them. People might hear a song, and they—you know, they hear the baseline or they—I hear other things in the music, and I use that to help make the style. I like to accent certain words off, you know, the music. My thing is to try to make—or should I say I try to implement what I'm doing as if I'm an instrument. So, if the beat is doing something, and I hear the music, and I hear little rhythms in the background, then maybe I'm the guitar on this song. And I'm doing the rhythm like the guitar. Or I might hear a high-hat riding through the whole song that's just, you know, dope. And I might ride the high hat, you know, depending on.

But I would find something to help create the style. And then, from that I would play off of that. And I always thought if I can hear the music different, then I can always make a new style. So, I think that's what it was, just trying to implement the music in a way that sounds like I'm a part of the band.

[00:29:55] **Jesse Thorn:** You described yourself as a laid-back dude, and that that was part of what you were putting onto record. I would say like the guys that came in your wake, the guys who came after you and were huge stars—you know, five years and seven years after you. Your Jay-Zs and your Biggies. They built on your style by having these similar flow characteristics but also a kind of quality of talking—like almost a conversational quality. And you described yourself as laid back on these records, and you are intense. Like, one of the qualities of your rapping on these records is how unrelentingly intense it is. So, it's a little more than just like—I understand that you're not being—(*chuckles*) that you're not doing jazz hands, you know what I mean? Like, you're not out there on the stage being Busy Bee, no disrespect to Busy Bee, who could rock any party anytime. Right?

(*Rakim agrees.*)

But just 'cause you're not out there goofing like wave your hands in the air like you just don't care, who came to party, who came to party—like, your level of intensity is enormous on these records! (*Chuckles.*)

[00:31:12] **Rakim:** Yeah. You know, you gotta try to pull it out, you know, when you need to. But that's my altered ego, and you know, everybody gotta “don't push that button” side, you know what I mean? But I think, you know, for the most part my overall mannerisms is laid back. And you know, a lot of records I do, it shows. But you know, of course you always gotta turn it up. You gotta try to turn it up.

[00:31:37] **Jesse Thorn:** Well, I'm gonna play a little bit of “Paid in Full” here, which was the title track from your first album with Eric B., and this is like one of the most legendary hip-hop records ever. And I think probably a relatively laid-back Eric B and Rakim record.

(*Music fades in.*)

(*Chuckling.*) But I think when our audience hears it, they'll notice that that is relative.

(*Rakim agrees.*)

[00:32:02] **Music:** “Paid in Full” from the album *Paid in Full* by Rakim and Eric B.

So, I start my mission, leave my residence

Thinking, "How could I get some dead presidents?"

I need money, I used to be a stick-up kid

So, I think of all the devious things I did

I used to roll up, "This is a hold-up, ain't nothing funny

Stop smiling, be still, don't nothing move but the money"

But now, I've learned to earn 'cause I'm righteous

I feel great, so maybe, I might just

Search for a nine to five, if I strive

Then maybe I'll stay alive

So, I walk up the street, whistling this

Feeling out of place 'cause, man, do I miss...

(Music fades out.)

[00:32:32] **Jesse Thorn:** There's a few times just in that little—where you flip your flow. The “roll up, this is a holdup” part is like just as the beat changes. And you know, I just—I'm like imagining you as a 19-year-old or however old you were when you wrote that.

[00:32:47] **Rakim:** I was 17. Yeah. 18.

[00:32:51] **Jesse Thorn:** Thinking of something that nobody in rap music had—else had figured out yet. You know what I mean?

[00:32:56] **Rakim:** Yeah, man, just—you know, just pushing the envelope. And also, you know, like the *Paid in Full* concept. When I—when we came up with the idea, the creative juices start flowing and you're like, “Alright, yeah. Paid in full. Paid in full. Ah, yeah, I'm gonna tell everybody to get paid in full.” And then it's like, okay, now how is that gonna happen? Like, if it was that easy, everybody would be paid in full. So, now I'm like, well, okay. Well, I'm gonna come up with a way to tell them how to get the money. (*Chuckles.*) So, you know, just trying to, you know, figure it out and be entertaining and also informal, you know what I mean? And then, you know, you're thinking about, well, what about when the record come out and people say, “Well, yeah, you know, you talking about getting paid in full, but you didn't give us no instructions.”

So, that was kind of the—you know, basically, you know, nine to five. Gotta work. That's what it is. You gotta work hard. You know what I mean? You grow up. We do stupid things when we're young, and you know, that's not getting paid in full. You gotta be smart, and you gotta work.

[00:34:04] **Jesse Thorn:** Did you have an understanding when those records came out of what their real impact was? And I mean, beyond just being hit records. They were hit records. Like, I'm sure you could go out and buy a chain if you wanted to in a way that you couldn't before, but like did you see hip-hop changing as those records percolated through the hip-hop world?

[00:34:25] **Rakim:** Nah, to be honest, I'm still that kid trying to see if I'm resonating with the world or what part of the world I'm resonating with. Still like testing the waters. I'm paying attention to the feedback. I'm paying attention to the magazine write-ups, everything I can get my ear on. It's like, you know, I'm curious. When we did them records, of course, I tried my best to do some real groundbreaking work or push the envelope or say things that haven't been said, say things that's profound. But you don't know if you did it. You know what I mean? You don't know until the people let you know. So, you know, that first album when it was done, we put it out, and I had to wait to see how people liked it. You know what I mean? To see if I was doing the right thing, saying the right thing.

And I'm also a real humble cat, man. I try not to let certain things get to me. I don't wanna ruin it. You know, I played sports all my life, and I remember learning how to take compliments and not let it get to you. Because somebody can tell you, you know—you can have a good game, and somebody could tell you how good you was, and you let your head get big. And the next week, you get your kneecap pushed back. So, I was always humble, because I didn't want to get my kneecap pushed back. So, I learned how to respond to accolades.

But with this here, you know, people telling you you're good and people telling you your music is dope. You know, I'm listening, but I don't want it to get to me. I don't want it to affect my process, you know what I mean? So, I'm trying to be humble and modest while I'm getting the information. But you know, after a while it is overwhelming to me listening to people tell me, you know, how my music sounds to them, how (*inaudible*) them or how it affected them. And I had to, you know, realize that I was doing something different. But it took a while.

[00:36:40] **Jesse Thorn:** So much more with Rakim still to come. It's *Bullseye* for MaximumFun.org and NPR.

[00:36:47] **Promo:**

(Fantastical tinkling and sparkle sounds.)

Narrator: (*Echoing.*) Somewhere, in an alternate universe where Hollywood is smarter.

(Harp chords fade into applause.)

Presenter: And the Emmy nominees for Outstanding Comedy Series are *Jetpackula*. *Airport Marriott*. *Throuple*. *Dear America, We've Seen You Naked*. And *Allah in the Family*.

(Applause fades into harp chords.)

Narrator: (*Echoing.*) In our stupid universe, you can't see any of these shows. But you can listen to them on *Dead Pilots Society*.

(*Rock music fades in.*)

The podcast that brings you hilarious comedy pilots that the networks and streamers bought but never made. Journey to the alternate television universe of *Dead Pilots Society* on MaximumFun.org.

(*Music fades out.*)

[00:37:32] **Transition:** Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

[00:37:37] **Jesse Thorn:** I'm Jesse Thorn. You're listening to *Bullseye*. My guest is the rapper Rakim.

Ice-T made this great documentary about rapping—specifically about rapping. And there's a segment where you're in there talking about how you write your rhymes, and you're showing the kind of intense care that you put into it.

[00:37:58] **Rakim:** Yes, sir.

[00:37:59] **Jesse Thorn:** And it was extraordinary. I mean, nobody in that film takes their craft lightly, you know what I mean? But like the intensity of the almost like charting your rhymes that you did was pretty extraordinary.

[00:38:14] **Rakim:** Yes. Yes, yes.

[00:38:17] **Jesse Thorn:** And I think that is one of the things that makes your rapping so special. I also wonder if you ever thought about how your music or your career would be different if you were the kind of guy who instead just kind of like went into the studio, turned on the spigot, let it go for a while, and turned off the spigot, and went home. You know, 'cause there certainly are great rappers for whom that is the way they make records, you know? So, I wonder if you ever thought about what if I did this different?

[00:38:49] **Rakim:** Definitely, you know. It's funny. My father one day, he was watching how I was real particular on what shows I would go to or, you know, how I would, you know, move around in the rap game. I remember Eric B—you know, I was real upset with Eric B, 'cause he went and told my pops—you know, I guess Eric thought I was still a kid. You know, I'm only 17, 18. I get it. But he even told my pops that I didn't like going to the studio all the time, and I didn't like the extracurricular (*censored*). Certain parties that Eric wanted to. “Yo, Ra, let's go here.” I'm like, for what? “Ra, let's—let's—” For what?

So, you know, Eric B seen how particular I was with things. So, I guess he thought that I was kind of not participating or not doing some of the things that he felt we needed to do. So, he went and told my pops. My pops came to me and asked me about it. And he did say, you know, “You know, this music thing, you have to hit while you hot.” And that echoed in my head, man. And still to this day. And you know, it's just something that my father was trying

to tell me. But I felt that. And I said, “This music genre here, Dad, it's a little different. I feel like people get tired of you quick.” I said, “It's real, you know, technical.” I said, “I don't think going to everything—every party in town just 'cause, you know, it's a party is good.” I said, “I wanna be around for a long time.”

So, you know, he understood what I was saying. But he also, you know, was right with what he was saying. You know, any music business, any genre—you know, you gotta hit when you're hot.

[00:40:46] **Jesse Thorn:** I wanna play a little bit of a record from later on in your career, from the time when you were signed to Aftermath. This is from a Jay-Z album, *The Blueprint 2*, and I really thought you ripped this song up, like you really sound great on this record.

(Rakim thanks him.)

It's called “The Watcher”. Let's hear a little bit of it.

[00:41:09] **Music:** “The Watcher 2” from the album *The Blueprint 2* by Jay-Z.

I'm rated R, my brain contains graphic things

It turn traumatic teens into addicts and fiends

It's like watching a movie through a panoramic screen

Which means I can see the whole planet in the scene

Cash is the topic—the object? A fatter pocket

Some take the— and chop it, but those that haven't got it

Take away to add a profit, it's catastrophic

I take the— and cock it, and I'll sit back and watch it

These New York streets is ugly, I keep it gully

The world is mine and can't nobody keep it from me

Yo, my neighborhood is never sunny

In the place where the number one cause of death is money

(Music fades out.)

[00:41:39] **Jesse Thorn:** So, during the time that you were recording with Dre, not a lot of music came out. Um, I have to say that at the time, I was not that surprised that not that much music came out. Both because—

(They chuckle.)

Both because A, of all the people signed to aftermath, almost nobody was putting out music. *(Laughs.)*

[00:41:57] **Rakim:** Yeah, bro.

[00:41:58] **Jesse Thorn:** Like, there were a lot of Bishop Lamont's—no shade to Bishop Lamont, but like there was these people signing to Aftermath and then just disappearing into a hole forever. And I was like, well, Dr. Dre is the most persnickety perfectionist in the history of rap music. And Rakim—

[00:42:18] **Rakim:** I thought I was well. *(Laughs.)*

[00:42:19] **Jesse Thorn:** Yeah, I was about to say, Rakim might be the other most persnickety. *(Laughs.)*

[00:42:22] **Rakim:** Word up, man. So, yeah, it was definitely—it was a challenge trying to get on the same page, man. You know, Dre got a—he has a recipe that he use that works, and I had mine. We just couldn't find that fine line, you know what I mean?

[00:42:42] **Jesse Thorn:** Was it all that scene with Marley Marl only it's Dr. Dre, and you're both grown up 35/40-year-old men?

[00:42:51] **Rakim:** Word up, you know. It's Dre pulling me this way, trying to get me around—you know, I guess topic-wise—and me knowing or feeling like that wasn't good for Rakim, especially at this time in his career. Um, but yeah, you know, again, it's—you know, I know for him it's hard for him to pull away from his recipe, and I didn't feel that I should have changed mine as well. So, it's difficult, but I learned a lot while I was out there, man. I stayed out there for maybe three years in California, you know. Just being around Dre gave me a better understanding or just a little extra love for creating and putting that extra skill or that extra time or that, you know, extra knowhow into what you do. You know, he's a perfectionist times 10.

[00:43:48] **Jesse Thorn:** I wanna ask you like how is it different for you to write and record the songs that you've made in the last 10 years or so as a—you know, not just a grownup, but like as a middle-aged man. You know, where your main living is probably being made from your catalog and touring. You don't need to make platinum records to earn a living. So, how is it different to go into the studio and be like, “Here I am, a man,” you know?

[00:44:25] **Rakim:** Um, I think it puts a lot in perspective. A long journey, but I think at this point it's—you know, you get the justice. You feel like, you know, you made the right decisions, as far as sticking to what you love. And yeah, man, it's—you know, you gotta kind

of say, “Alright, well if anything, I'm more mature now. I'm more disciplined now. I'm a better person. I'm a stronger person. I lived a lot of life, so I should have a lot more to say.”

And you know, I just fix myself on, you know, the journey and who I am and who I become and hopefully what's ahead. I love music, man. I love the form of painting pictures with words and trying to do it in a way that, you know, stands out. I was about to say my age. Yeah. I'm 55 right now, man. And I can't see not formulating words into paragraphs, into stories, into pictures. Like, I can't see myself not doing that, even though sometimes it's the hardest crap to do in the world. You know what I mean? It's definitely not easy, but I don't wanna stop doing what I'm doing. I love it.

[00:45:48] **Jesse Thorn:** There aren't a lot of rappers who have the life that you have. It feels like for the last now 25 years, you've had a life that's involved a lot of like stability and spending time with your kids.

[00:46:03] **Rakim:** Yes, sir. Yes, sir. Yes, sir.

[00:46:07] **Jesse Thorn:** That must be something you chose.

[00:46:09] **Rakim:** Yes. Yes, man. That means a lot, you know, being a man first, being a good husband, being a good father. I never wanted my kids to not know me. So, I made it my business. I used to fly home every weekend, man. We used to get two days off on the road. After that last show of the week, I would take the red eye home, and then I would take the last plane back, and I—sometimes, I'd barely make it to stage, getting off the plane, coming from the airport, going straight to stage sometimes. But I always wanted to be a father first. If you take care of your responsibilities and do what you're supposed to do, I felt my job will be a little easier. That's, you know, inspiring yourself, you know what I mean? To me, like there's no bigger thing that I can do than that.

So, if I can do that, then I can be a better rapper. Being a good father is the hardest thing in the world. Even though sometimes you may be doing everything right, sometimes your kids might not see it. They may think that you're doing everything against them. So, if I can do that good, then it'll help me be a better rapper. 'Cause I'm doing what I'm supposed to do. You know, I'm—you know, being there for my kids. I'm being informal. I'm firm with them. I'm fun with them, you know. I'm what you call a good father, man. And that there makes me feel good. So, everything else is easy.

[00:47:46] **Jesse Thorn:** Well, Rakim, thank you so much for taking this time to talk to me. You're welcome back on the show anytime. It's a real honor to have you.

[00:47:53] **Rakim:** Hey, man. Thanks for the welcome mat, man.

[00:47:55] **Jesse Thorn:** Rakim. If you wanna see him live, it's a great show. You can catch him playing across the country with acts like LL Cool J and Big Daddy Kane.

[00:48:05] **Transition:** Relaxed, jazzy synth.

[00:48:10] **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. Although, this week I went home to San Francisco and the Mission District and my mom's apartment—and specifically her basement—where I found a flyer that I made when my then co-host on this show, Jordan Morris, and I were still in college doing college radio. And for a fundraiser, we did an entire episode of the show from the base of the campus of UC Santa Cruz, in our underpants. Tightly-whities specifically.

Our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producers, Jesus Ambrosio and Richard Robey. Our production fellow at Maximum Fun, Bryanna Paz. We get booking help from Mara Davis. Our interstitial music is by the great Dan Wally, aka DJW. Our theme song is “Huddle Formation”, written and recorded by the great band, The Go! Team. Thanks to them and to their label, Memphis Industries.

And hey, guess what? *Bullseye* is now on Instagram! We are gonna share interview highlights and looks behind the scenes and cool stuff we think is cool. You can find us there on the Insta, [@BullseyewithJesseThorn](#), and follow us, and tell everybody you know to get with it. [@BullseyewithJesseThorn](#) on Instagram. Let's go. I think that's about it. Just remember, all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

[00:49:43] **Promo:** *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of [MaximumFun.org](#) and is distributed by NPR.

(Music fades out.)