

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

[00:00:1] **Promo:** *Bullseye* with Jesse Thorn is a production of [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and is distributed by NPR.

[00:00:14] **Music:** “Le Freak” from the album *C'est Chic* by Chic.

*One, two*

*Ah, freak out!*

*Le freak, c'est Chic*

*Freak out!*

*(Music continues under the dialogue.)*

[00:00:22] **Jesse Thorn:** It's *Bullseye*, I'm Jesse Thorn. Nile Rodgers was a founding member of the band Chic. If you don't know Chic by name, you certainly know this.

[00:00:34] **Music:** “Le Freak” by Chic.

*Have you heard about the new dance craze?*

*Listen to us, I'm sure you'll be amazed*

*Big fun to be had by everyone*

*It's up to you; it surely can be done*

*(Music fades out.)*

[00:00:49] **Jesse Thorn:** Or maybe this.

[00:00:50] **Music:** “Good Times” from the album *Risqué* by Chic.

*These are the good times*

*Leave your cares behind*

*(Music fades out.)*

[00:01:16] **Jesse Thorn:** After Chic, Rodgers became one of the most successful pop music producers of all time. He worked with Madonna, David Bowie, the B-52's, Duran Duran,

Grace Jones—a huge, expansive list of artists. But the music had one thing in common. It was for everyone. And you could dance to it.

[00:01:34] **Music:** “Let’s Dance” from the album *Let’s Dance* by David Bowie.

*Ah, ah, ah, ah*

*Let’s dance*

*Put on your red shoes and dance the blues*

*Let’s dance*

*To the song they’re playing on the radio*

*(Music fades out.)*

[00:02:16] **Jesse Thorn:** When I talked to Nile Rodgers, it was way back in 2011. In fact, it was so long ago that I was still recording the show at my house. So, he was in the third-floor master bedroom—I mean it was the office—of my house on Mount Washington Dr., in Mount Washington. He came in and was just a double-barreled shotgun of pleasantness and charm from the moment he crossed my threshold.

And this was before—two years before—Rodgers, after 40 years of making music, helped cut another immortal single with Daft Punk.

[00:02:57] **Music:** “Get Lucky” from the album *Random Access Memories* by Daft Punk.

*We’re up all night to get lucky*

*We’re up all night to get lucky*

*We’re up all night to get lucky*

*We’re up all night to get lucky*

*We’re up all night to get lucky*

*We’re up all night to get lucky*

*We’re up all night to get lucky*

*(Music fades out.)*

[00:03:19] **Jesse Thorn:** These days, Rodgers is still touring. Still producing, too. He just put out a record with Pitbull. This is “Freak 54 (*Freak Out*)”.

[00:03:28] **Music:** “Freak 54 (*Freak Out*)” from the album *Trackhouse* by Pitbull.

*I'm calling my freaks! (Mr. Worldwide)*

*I'm calling all my freaks (This is for all the freaky ladies)*

*To the dance floor right now*

*Girl, freak out!*

*Get nasty, get wild,*

*Freak out!*

*Just let it all hang out*

*Freak out!*

*If you wanna get turnt out*

*Freak out!*

*Girl, freak out!*

*(You've got a lot of talent, there)*

*Yes I do, in a...*

*(Music fades out.)*

[00:03:55] **Jesse Thorn:** So, in the first couple of chapters of your new book—which is called *Le Freak*—it was sort of a continuing series of revelations of just outrageous family situations. (*Chuckles.*) So, let's start. You were born in the very beginning of the 1950s in New York. Tell me a little bit about your mother, your father, and the man who had the most father-ish role in your life, your stepfather.

[00:04:28] **Nile Rodgers:** Yes, my mom was a really cool girl. She was actually born in Jersey, but by the time I was born, she had moved to New York City. My biological father is Nile Rodgers Sr.—he was a percussionist who was sort of popular at the time. He played with a guy named Paul Whiteman, who was known as the King of Jazz.

[00:04:50] **Jesse Thorn:** And tell me about your stepfather, Bobby.

[00:04:52] **Nile Rodgers:** My stepfather—my mom married Bobby I think like in the early '60s or maybe even the late '50s. And Bobby was Jewish, incredibly handsome, maybe one of the coolest guys I've ever known.

[00:05:12] **Jesse Thorn:** If you—you called your mother and stepfather by their first names. And if you had told me that and you were born in, you know—I was born in 1981—or even 1966, and you were seven years old in 1973, or something like that, I don't think that would be that surprising. But I imagine that in the late 1950s, early 1960s, a Black lady and a Jewish guy, married and living together with a few different kids by different people, calling them by their first names in a semi-open marriage was pretty crazy!

[00:05:54] **Nile Rodgers:** I would say it was a very open marriage.

*(They chuckle.)*

There wasn't anything semi about it.

[00:05:59] **Jesse Thorn:** Were you aware of the way that you were culturally different from your peers? That you had these hipster and later, to a growing extent, junkie parents, and they were—you know, they had their artsy friends over. All I can imagine—you don't describe it too specifically, but I just imagine a lot of people in black turtlenecks snapping instead of clapping.

[00:06:27] **Nile Rodgers:** Absolutely.

*(Jesse laughs.)*

It was almost a caricature of the beatnik scene. I remember when this television show called *Dobie Gillis* came on and they had this character, Maynard G Krebs, and I was like, "That's my man! I know Maynard!" You know, it didn't seem weird to me. Actually, other people's families seemed weird, because everybody in my immediate circles, they were like my parents. So, everybody talked that hipster talk. Everybody was like, "Hey." You know, the super slow, junkie thing. *(Slowly.)* "Hey, Nile. What's up?" Actually, no one ever called me Nile. I was Pud. But, you know, "Hey, Pud, what's happening?" And I was a kid, so it was normal. It was completely normal. And the amount of gay people, the amount of—I mean, it was a colorful crowd.

[00:07:14] **Jesse Thorn:** The other thing about your childhood, as you describe it in your book, is that you were in 1,000 different places and also nowhere. I mean, you were living with your two grandmothers. You had, you know, the—it just feels like there was—I don't

hear from you telling your story any time where you could be like, “This is the place where I am me and not where I have to have my dukes up.”

[00:07:45] **Nile Rodgers:** Well, that's almost true. When the hippie movement became really popular, that was the first time I felt really, really comfortable. From a very early age, I used to—I developed insomnia really young, and I'd stay up all night, much to the discomfort of the adults in my world—because I'd have a light on or the television on or something like that, and they'd get pissed off. So, I started to run away and sleep on the train and then sneak back in the house before they'd wake up in the morning. So, one day when I was a lot older, I was about 15 or 16, I had just moved back to New York from Los Angeles. And I snuck out to sleep on the subway, and I ran into a hippie. And this guy sort of took me under his wing, and from that moment on, I never really slept at home again, at least not for any lengthy period of time.

But that night that I met this guy, we went, and we slept in a crash pad. And it was a room filled with bodies, everybody lying on the floor on mattresses and wall to wall mattresses, and we smoked from a big hookah. And it was that communal life that made me feel comfortable, because I always felt like someone had my back.

[00:09:06] **Jesse Thorn:** The last time I visited my aunt in Washington, DC, who's probably just about your age, she told me about going to Woodstock. And she's African American, and she was just in her closet, and she pulled out this huge peace sign that she had in the back of her car, and she's like, “Oh, I put this in the back of my car for when I drove to Woodstock!” And her memory of Woodstock was—

[00:09:31] **Nile Rodgers:** That means she's a little older than me. She had a driver's license.

*(Laughs.)*

[00:09:35] **Jesse Thorn:** Fair enough. So, she—but not much, because she's the kind of lady who was doing that stuff at 16.

*(Nile chuckles.)*

So, she said to me—her recollection of Woodstock was this: that she got there, she looked around and saw all the white people, and thought, “Oh, I'm the only person here to see Sly.” And I wonder if you had any self-consciousness about race being in a hippie world that was very—you know, it was partly about eliminating race as a category, but it was also very racialized.

[00:10:15] **Nile Rodgers:** Yeah, it was very real. I was lucky, because I lived in a certain part in New York—I lived in Greenwich Village—and even when I moved to the Bronx, all of my friends were sort of—they were black hippies, they were white hippies, Puerto Ricans. It was—we were from this really eclectic, unusual mix of people. My best friends were deadheads, all the deadheads I knew were Black. Some of the musicians that I played with played with, you know, Leopold Stokowski's sons—the genius head of the American Symphony Orchestra.

So, we were a very cool group. It wasn't—the racism that we used feel mainly came from the outside world. In the hippie culture, I came along during the time of the White Panthers, John Sinclair, the MC5, David Peel and the Lower East Side, the Stooges. So, I come from a background where a lot of the musicians—whatever racism and racial problems that you had in society, that would go away in the context of a band.

[00:11:31] **Jesse Thorn:** More still to come with Nile Rodgers. It's *Bullseye* from [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and NPR.

[00:11:38] **Transition:** Chiming synth with a syncopated beat.

[00:11:43] **Jesse Thorn:** Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. If you're just joining us, we are listening back to my 2011 conversation with the great Nile Rodgers. He fronted the band Chic in the 1970s and went on to produce some of the biggest hit records of all time, like this one.

[00:11:57] **Music:** “Like a Virgin” from the album *Like a Virgin* by Madonna.

*I made it through the wilderness*

*Somehow, I made it through*

*Didn't know how lost I was*

*Until I found you...*

*(Music fades out.)*

[00:12:19] **Jesse Thorn:** Let's get into the rest of our conversation.

You were playing with a sort of traditional R&B group touring the country. And that group, who had had a big hit and had opened for the Jackson Five, didn't end up having a lot of other chart success. And you were playing with other groups on and off. And this sort of ran from the early '70s into the mid-'70s when disco started to happen for real. I wonder if you could describe to me, just aesthetically, what the difference was between the disco records that started to percolate in the mid-'70s and the R&B records of just a couple of years earlier.

[00:13:04] **Nile Rodgers:** Basically, what had happened, there was a sort of political, spiritual, and musical convergence of all of these disparate, seemingly unconnected vibes. And what happened was disco was the sort of party that said, “Come on in! Everybody's invited. You know, the water's fine.” And I noticed that the jazz guys that I used to follow religiously were all of a sudden starting to get hit records that were on the same charts as the R&B artists. And then every now and then, they would cross over to the pop and rock artists. And it wasn't really called disco at the time. It would later be called disco. But at the beginning it was just sort of—it was groove. It was funk. It was dance music. It was some other thing. But it had this shared DNA of jazz and R&B, but it was very open.

And when I heard that happening and I saw it on the charts, the time had finally come where I knew I where I belong, where I had a place that I could do my jazzy, classical, wacky stuff and also write commercial hooks.

*(Music fades in.)*

And the very first song I composed for that style was a song by my band Chic called “Everybody Dance” and with these really hip chord changes, but I superimposed this ridiculously simple melody. And I wrote, *(singing)* “Everybody dance, do-do-dodo, clap your hands, clap your hands.”

And I remember I played that for Bernard Edwards the first time, and it was all complicated with these hip jazz chord changes and he said to me, “Uhh, my man. Uh, you know, it's happening, but what the *(censor beep)* does do-do-dodo mean?”

And I said, “Well, you know, it's the same thing as la-la-la-la.”

He said, “Well, why don't you say that?”

And I said, “Because do-do-dodo is hipper!” I said, “If you listen to all these like these records, you always hear them go, do-do-dodo-dodo, do-do-do, do-do-dodo-dodo! No one's going, la-la-lalalala!” That was like the difference between hip and being, you know, like a boy scout around a campfire. So, I stuck that in “Everybody Dance”, and Chic was off and running.

[00:15:17] **Music:** “Everybody Dance” from the album *Chic* by Chic.

*Everybody dance, do-do-dodo*

*Clap your hands, clap your hands*

*Everybody dance, do-do-dodo*

*Clap your hands, clap your hands*

*Everybody dance, do-do-dodo*

*Clap your hand, clap your hands*

*Everybody dance, do-do-dodo*

*Clap your hands, clap your hands*

*(Music fades out.)*

[00:15:47] **Jesse Thorn:** I was listening to that song; I hadn't listened to it in a

While. And the thing that struck me was just the absurd complexity of the bassline of that song.

[00:15:56] **Nile Rodgers:** (*Laughing.*) It's ridiculous!

[00:15:57] **Jesse Thorn:** Because, I mean, it is—like a lot of dance records from that period, the bass is a really important part of the melody of that song, but it is just going all over everywhere! I mean, it is—there's 1,000 different things happening!

(*Nile agrees.*)

And it's interesting to me that one of the things that typified those Chic records was the confluence of the simplest of simple. That they were driven by the classic disco beat—I mean, with a lot of other stuff going on around it on the drums as well, but the central thing is that classic disco beat. They're driven by lyrics like—I mean, they're all called “Dance—” Something, you know what I mean?

[00:16:38] **Nile Rodgers:** Right! (*Laughs.*) “Everybody Dance”, “Dance, Dance, Dance”.

[00:16:41] **Jesse Thorn:** Like, every song's lyric is like, “We're all dancing together. I'm enjoying dancing. “Like, hey, isn't dancing great?” But then there are also these other things that are going on that are like laughably complicated for a pop record. (*Chuckles.*)

[00:16:53] **Nile Rodgers:** Yeah, no, no. I mean, that's what we call—in Chic, that's what we used to call DHM: the Deep Hidden Meaning. I, as a writer, am the most complicated person in the world. Maybe even as a person. You know, I'm ridiculous. And that's because everything that I do is governed by these invisible voices in my head of my old music teachers—what I call the jazz and classical police. (*Haughtily.*) “Um, excuse me, Nile. During the recapitulation, where you—”

You know, it was like, “Okay, well, the counterpoint—” Like, okay, guys. So, that's the voices I always hear. Every time I write a song, it's so complicated, it's ridiculous. And Bernard used to be the great divining rod to find the—you know, the water that would save our lives. Because I was like, you know, this stuff is too complicated. And many times, he would say to me, “Uh, you know, brother, you got five or six songs in there.”

(*Jesse chuckles.*)

And he was right. We wound up writing five or six songs from an original idea that I would have.

[00:17:55] **Jesse Thorn:** You also helped create another central, distinguishing element of disco as a sound, which is that breakdowns and breaks—which, you know, I mean, obviously your song “Good Times” became the first—was transformed into the first huge hip-hop

record—were a central part of what you were doing, which was something that you could do. Because you could make a lot—you could put a lot more music on a 12-inch record than you could on a 45.

*(Nile confirms.)*

And so, you had room to have something very complicated, break it all the way down to the simplest—sometimes even just a drum pattern, and then build it back up.

[00:18:32] **Nile Rodgers:** The concept with Chic was we always—we believed our parts were clever. We were a part-playing band, and we always wanted to show it off. You know what I mean? So, our basic philosophy was, you know, a song is just an excuse to go to a chorus, and a chorus is just an excuse to go to the breakdown. And that's really what we believed in. We just couldn't wait to get to the breakdown.

[00:18:59] **Music:** “Good Times” by Chic.

*Good times!*

*(Music continues under the dialogue.)*

[00:19:10] **Nile Rodgers:** And that was our thing. We wanted to show people how the song was constructed. And basically, what we would do is we'd take it apart, and then we'd rebuild it in the listener's ears. So, you could hear all those little parts come in. Because typically when you hear the full groove, you actually don't really know what we're playing. When I hear cover bands play Chic songs, I'm laughing. I go, “That's what you think we're playing?” They don't get the subtleties. They don't understand the upbeats going against the down and still sounding like it's all in the pocket, because we have the four on the floor bass drum. So, we were always proud of what we did, and we wanted to show people how hip it was. And we also knew that breakdowns work live.

*(Music fades out.)*

[00:20:09] **Music:** “Dance, Dance, Dance (*Yowsah, Yowsah, Yowsah*)” from the album *Chic* by Chic.

*Dance, dance, dance, dance*

*Keep on dancing*

*Dance, dance, dance, dance*

*(Music fades out.)*

[00:20:21] **Jesse Thorn:** Things were changing in pop music as the idea of a dance club where DJs played records became central to people's experience of pop music. Relative to,

say, hearing a song on the radio or going to see a band. And part of what that allowed was something that I think was central to what Chic was, which is it allowed for a band to exist as much as a concept or a sort of set of aesthetic values—you know, visual and musical and the whole nine yards—as a group of people.

So, Chic were largely invisible. I mean, your shows were essentially an effort to create a live version of the album covers that didn't feature any of you.

*(Nile confirms.)*

And that's a really interesting—that's a really interesting idea to me, that you could start a band that almost removes the people from the equation.

[00:21:24] **Nile Rodgers:** Right. You're really—I love talking to you. You're great, man! This is—I'm not going to get any sleep today. That's—you got it spot on. What happened was—the etiology of that concept was I went to a show in London to see Roxy Music. And Roxy Music was playing at this joint called the Roxy Theater or the Roxy Hole or something. And when I got in there, I had never heard of Roxy Music prior to this. The girl I was dating took me there to see these guys. And when I got inside, I had seen something that was sort of familiar—like what I had seen at the Apollo. You know, because everybody came in with their shtick and their costumes and the whole bit. But once they got offstage, then somebody else came on.

But Roxy Music, they presented what I started to call a total immersive artistic experience. Like, when you walked inside, it was like going into a museum. You know, when you go into a museum—regardless of what's going on outside those doors—you're in that space. And if it's about—if it's the Tutankhamen exhibit, you're all wrapped in Egyptology or what have you. When you went to see Roxy music in the Roxy theater, it was amazing. The audience seemed like part of the vibe. This sort of—this textural music. It was almost spiritual, I have to say.

And then when we put our Chic sophisto funk band together—'cause we sort of designed it. We had an outline. We had a thumbnail concept of what it would be, and we started to fit the pieces into the puzzle. I describe it was sort of like the Magnificent Seven. You go out, and you're looking for gunslingers. And we found Tony Thompson first, who had just come from LaBelle. So, he was into the fantasy fusion thing. So, that was cool. Then we found Rob Sabino, and Rob Sabino is the real sort of under-sung hero in Chic, because Rob Sabino turned us on to his buddy Ace Frehley's band, which was KISS. And when we went to see Kiss, pow! All of a sudden, it was clear as a bell.

*(KISS music fades in.)*

These guys were onstage; it was almost like a carnival where they come to town, you get immersed in the world of KISS, and they pack up and go to the next town. And I just looked at Bernard and said, “This is it. We have to do this.” And Bernard agreed. Because Bernard knew that I didn't look like him or act—I didn't act like him. And he certainly didn't look like me or act like me. But we could create this thing where we both could come together and be those guys. We were role playing. And we could both put on suits. We could pretend that we

were Cab Calloway or something like that but the modern version of Cab Calloway, a modern version of Count Basie. You know, Count Basie was the band leader. He sat there on the piano, but it was all the soloists and all those guys in his band that were the stars. He was the arranger.

That's what Nile Rodgers was. Nile Rodgers was the songwriter, arranger. Bernard Edwards was the guy who was the band leader. And that's how our partnership worked so great. And at that point—you know, if you look at the time period, you have this all-inclusive music, this all-inclusive scene. Didn't make any difference whether you were White, Black, fat, gay, lesbian, whatever. If you had music that kept people on the dance floor, you rule.

*(Disco music fades in.)*

We never had to explain it to the musicians, and we never had to tell, you know, other musicians what Chic was about what our concept was about. And they never really called us a disco band in the same way that you would call Cerrone disco. Cerrone is clearly disco. The Village People are clearly disco. We were this other funk dance thing, which now I will call disco, because everybody keeps doing it. So, forget it. If you can't beat them, join them. One guy told me that our music was what they called Black disco.

I went, “Oh, guys, come on already.” *(Laughs.)*

[00:25:35] **Jesse Thorn:** I want to ask you—I want to ask you about that part of it. Because disco at its height in, you know, 1978/1979, was getting it from two sides. One side was this return to rock and roll that spawned Disco Sucks—the Disco Sucks movement that was—I think we can say now, 30 years later, informed, you know, partly by people's aesthetic preferences but also partly by a combination of racism and homophobia.

*(Nile agrees.)*

People who did not like the idea of a world where everybody came in together in that way that you described.

[00:26:18] **Nile Rodgers:** That's right. And that Sylvester could outsell the Rolling Stones. *(Laughs.)*

[00:26:20] **Jesse Thorn:** Yeah, but the other way that disco was getting it was from people who saw themselves as defenders of Blackness who did not like the way disco essentially deracinated—took the race out—of dance music. So, you know like Funkadelic had a character named the Anti Disco Kid.

*(Nile confirms.)*

And so, there are these two forces pushing against disco. And I wonder—I mean, I think that we hear a lot about the one where, you know, Meathead rock and rollers are burning disco records. But as a guy who thought of himself partly as being in a funk band, how did you feel about that pressure coming from the other side, that you were—you had come from this

musical movement in 1973 where, you know, Blackness was central to Black popular music in 1970. Could not have been more, you know, “I’m Black and I’m proud”.

*(Nile confirms.)*

But then five years later, part of what disco was about was eliminating race from the conversation.

[00:27:25] **Nile Rodgers:** Right, but—and you’re absolutely right. So, there’s two great examples for me. At the same time there was “Say It Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud”, Curtis Mayfield wrote, “If There’s a Hell Below, We’re All Gonna Go”. And it was from the—it’s the same era. We did a show in San Diego one year where we were opening for Marvin Gaye. And Marvin had never heard of us, really. And anyway, we played. We got a huge standing ovation. Years later when I thought that Marvin Gaye hated us because the San Diego show was unbelievable. If you look at any of the Chic tour books and they ask the members of Chic, “What’s the most memorable show?” It’s San Diego, California.

So, years later, somebody asked Marvin Gaye how he felt about disco and did he like any disco music? And he says, “Well, you know, there is one band I like.” One band, Marvin Gaye. And I’m like going what band is that? And he says Chic. And he says, “Yeah, Chic. They really do some interesting stuff with—” I mean, you can find the interview. It’s on record. I couldn’t believe it. I just found this out when I was doing this book. And I thought wow. You know, ‘cause Marvin Gaye would have been in the other side that was anti the four on the floor, the anti— Not as an artist. He wouldn’t be anti-Sylvester. I mean, believe me, anybody like Marvin, anybody like Sylvester, you had to have respect for him. Because, you know, the artists that were those—the early sort of disco pioneers that were obviously gay and blah, blah, blah.

I mean, have you ever listened to The Village People’s first album? I think it’s sheer genius. And I also think that it’s that kind of record that was so brilliant and so popular that it does put people on edge. They don’t want to believe that gay people can come up with something that’s that incredible, that so holistically defines where they’re coming from and do it in such an artistic way that the deep, hidden meaning of that project almost becomes irrelevant. Like, you know, when you think about the New York Yankees adopting “YMCA” as their—and they have umpires who are basically guys who go “Dese, Dem, and Dose” on the field going, *(singing gravelly)* “Y-M-C-A!”

[00:29:46] **Jesse Thorn:** I mean, one of the things that’s, I think, so powerful about it is that it is something—those most powerful moments in disco are—a lot of them are super, super gay, culturally come from just super gayness.

*(Nile agrees.)*

And they are uniting people who—especially in 1979, but even today—are very uncomfortable with that world.

[00:30:13] **Nile Rodgers:** That's right. I mean, when you think about it, when we wrote "We Are Family" for Sister Sledge, we honestly were just writing an R&B breakdown dance record for a group of sisters that we had never met.

(*"We Are Family" fades in.*)

But we saw these girls as a cutting-edge family, like the Jackson Five. So, it was sincere. We were trying to define these girls that were on the cutting edge, defining that lifestyle. And of course, we know that when it comes to fashion, there are a lot of gay voices in fashion. When it comes to that sort of cutting-edge visual arts coming together, there's a gay undercurrent, if not a frontal gay thing. And my favorite thing in life was to watch the Pittsburgh Pirates sing, "I got all my sisters with me." Bernard and I used to laugh our ( *censor beep*) off. It was hysterical to us!

We used to say, "Look at these big, burly men who are probably some of the most macho dudes in America." Especially those days!

[00:31:14] **Jesse Thorn:** Willie (*inaudible*), right? Like, 6'5", 250.

[00:31:16] **Nile Rodgers:** Like, 6'10"! Right! Yeah, like a million pounds. Looks like a sumo wrestler. And they're all going, (*singing gutturally*) "We are family! Uh, uh, uh, I got all my sisters with me!" And 'Nard and I used to crack up. Because if you went to a gay club and played that, you'd see people who were flamboyant singing the same song with the same zeal. And that's what we really believed in, and that's what the disco movement gave everybody.

(*Music fades out.*)

[00:31:48] **Jesse Thorn:** We'll finish up with Nile Rodgers after a quick break. Stick around. It's *Bullseye* from [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and NPR.

[00:31:57] **Promo:**

**Music:** Quirky, magical synth.

**Griffin McElroy:** Folks, we get it. Keeping up with an actual play podcast in this economy is a tough sell. That's why we have great news for you! *The Adventure Zone* is changing up its format. We're going to be doing some shorter seasons, more experimental stuff. There's never been a better time to get on board the zone!

**Travis McElroy:** And if you're sick of listening to our voices, we get that too. So, we're including some guests. On this upcoming one, we've got Kate Welch and Gabe Hicks, who are incredible.

**Clint McElroy:** And you want us to try out some new games? You got it. We've got the new Marvel Multiverse RPG. We're using that and with a really brilliant GM doing it.

**Travis:** It's Dad. What he's saying is it's Dad.

**Griffin:** Dad's just doing it, yeah.

**Travis:** It's Dad doing it.

**Griffin:** You can listen every Thursday on [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) or wherever you get your podcasts.

*(Music fades out.)*

[00:32:39] **Music:** Chiming synth with a syncopated beat.

[00:32:44] **Jesse Thorn:** It's *Bullseye*, I'm Jesse Thorn, I'm talking with Nile Rodgers, guitarist and legendary record producer.

In 1983, you produced David Bowie's bestselling record. And it had this amazing single on it called "Let's Dance", and I want to hear a little bit of it.

[00:33:02] **Music:** "Let's Dance" from by David Bowie.

*Let's dance*

*Put on your red shoe and dance the blues*

*Let's dance*

*To the song they're playing on the radio*

*Let's sway*

*While color lights up your face*

*Let's sway*

*Sway through the crowd to an empty space*

*(Music fades out.)*

[00:33:32] **Jesse Thorn:** There's something really interesting to me about this song, because came for you after disco had gone from everything to nothing in the space of—I don't know, two years, maybe. And your power as ultimate hitmaker maker with your partner, Bernard Edwards, had gone from, you know, just solid platinum, everything you touched, to not working anymore because people hate disco. And there's something really amazing about this song, which is that I think that there is a really interesting contrast that a lot of—that became

pop music, that became what you produced for Madonna and so on and so forth that was more than just a White person doing Black people music, I think.

There's this element in this David Bowie song of the coolness of Bowie. The reserve, the rockstar, a slightly off-center angularity of Bowie, as a contrast with—you know, like what sounds in some ways like a—what sounds in some ways like a dance record and in some ways like—you know, like it's “Twist and Shout” or something like that. And that was a new thing. And I see somewhere in here, you mentioned Bowie describing it as like a postmodern reconstruction of dance music. That is what it sounds like because of that—I mean, not dissonance; it's a combination of dissonance and consonance—of that coolness, that pulling back, and that pushing forward that comes from dance music.

[00:35:04] **Nile Rodgers:** The interesting thing about the *Let's Dance* project was when David and I started working on that project, before one note of music was determined to be on that record, all we did was research. And when David was studying himself, I was studying David. He was showing me what the past was. Because we can only show the past, right? That's what we—everything that we could listen to and watch was something that was documented. And we were taking these documents to use as the blueprint to go into the future, to this new place. And it was really interesting how the first night David and I met, all we did was talk about jazz—from the most avantgarde to almost the most straight-ahead and commercial.

So, I knew that David loved jazz, and I knew that the jazzy elements that I could put in “Let's Dance” or even on other tracks on that album but certainly “Let's Dance”—I've never made a record that's been a pop record that's that avantgarde. With that little pocket trumpet solo at the beginning? I mean, (*mumbling*) come on! But only Bowie and guys like that can get away with it. And because I was really in the zone when I did that record—David even instructed me to make hits. I mean, literally he said, “Nile, I want you to do what you do best.”

And I was offended. I said, “What do you mean? You—” You know, I was an artist. (*Affronted.*) “You don't know what I do best! The world doesn't know what I do best! I've never been unleashed on the world with my genius!” It was like, no, you make hits. Oh, really? And in my case, I usually get called when an artist is not doing well. So, it's always been doubly hard for me. And I don't get to just, you know, write and produce the great single. I have to do the whole album to come up with that great single. So, it's a tricky thing.

“Let's Dance” showed me that I could do what I was doing with Black artists, I can now do that with White artists. Because with White artists it wouldn't be called disco. All of a sudden it was dance, it was new wave, it was modern rock, it was all of these other new, gentrified titles which basically meant the same thing. Because I was never doing—I never did—at least, I never thought I did anybody's last record. I always thought I was doing someone's next record.

So, Bowie said to me something really fantastic when we were doing *Let's Dance*. He says that he's never been placed in a box. He's never felt that to make music, he has to do what people expect him to do or even what people think he should do. He says he always does whatever it is that makes him feel good. Basically. I'm paraphrasing him poorly, but that's what he was saying, and that gave me a lot of strength when we did *Let's Dance*, because it

made me believe that, wow, I could work with this guy who I call the Picasso of rock and roll and make pop songs, but they'd be uniquely his. Nothing sounds like “Let's Dance” in my repertoire. It's the only thing that sounds like that, and that's because it was for Bowie. Nothing sounds like “I'm Coming Out”, because it was for Diana Ross. Nothing sounds like “We Are Family”, because it was for Sister Sledge.

[00:38:32] **Jesse Thorn:** I want to ask you one last thing, which is that you—like, about a year ago, you had major cancer surgery.

*(Nile confirms.)*

And you had by then already spent years looking at your life in order to write this book, interviewing family members and all the people that you knew and that kind of thing, as well as just spending time with your recollections. And you had had this life that, at times—you know, at the height of your addictions was just insanely wild and flirted with death every day, but you never, yourself, had run into that wall. But I wonder how having that experience of mortality changed both how you looked at your life in the past and how you looked at how you wanted to use the life that you have in the future.

[00:39:36] **Nile Rodgers:** Well. *(Laughs.)* That's like the greatest question. The life that I want in the future—actually, I wrote about it today on the airplane flying into Los Angeles. That—and I say this with 100% sincerity—that the life that I want for myself now is however the Grim Reaper—whenever the Grim Reaper decides to claim me and keep me for good, I just want to be able to play songs when I'm doing it. If I lose the ability to play music, I'll probably be—I don't mean to be so fatalistic and end the interview on such a wacky note, but I'm really as good as dead then. I live for music.

It's probably unfortunate that I'm that myopic, but I don't really mean that. I have a lot of interests. But I could live without those other interests. I cannot live without music. I can't live without being able to play music. Now what does that mean?

*(Music fades in.)*

I don't have to be a star. I don't have to hit records anymore. I just have to be able to pick up the guitar and practice.

[00:40:56] **Transition:** Chiming synth with a syncopated beat.

[00:40:59] **Jesse Thorn:** Nile Rodgers, recorded at my house in 2011. What a legend! He is now in his 70s, still touring, still working, still producing. He's still got it. We'll have a link to his website on the *Bullseye* page at [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org).

*(Music fades out.)*

[00:41:19] **Transition:** Thumpy synth.

[00:41:23] **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've got a shed in my backyard that needs flooring. What do you think about linoleum?

The show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. I'm gonna check in with him about linoleum as soon as I leave the studio. Our producers are Jesus Ambrosio and Richard Robey. Our production fellow at Maximum Fun is Bryanna Paz. By the way, we are hiring a new production fellow at Maximum Fun! So, if you are a *Bullseye* listener or a public radio fan or a podcast person and you would like to have a one year paid fellowship making radio and podcasts here at Maximum Fun in LA, just go to [MaximumFun.org/jobs](https://MaximumFun.org/jobs). And if you know somebody, [MaximumFun.org/jobs](https://MaximumFun.org/jobs). It's a great gig. Work directly with the *Bullseye* team, among other things, here at MaxFun. It's a lot of fun.

We get booking help from Mara Davis. Our interstitial music is by DJW, also known as Dan Wally. Our theme song is "Huddle Formation". It was written and recorded by The Go! Team. Thanks to The Go! Team. Thanks to Memphis Industries, their label.

*Bullseye* is on Instagram! There are interview highlights there, behind the scenes looks, all kinds of stuff. [@BullseyeWithJesseThorn](https://twitter.com/BullseyeWithJesseThorn). I think that's about it. Just remember, all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

[00:42:47] **Promo:** *Bullseye* with Jesse Thorn is a production of [MaximumFun.org](https://MaximumFun.org) and is distributed by NPR.

*(Music fades out.)*