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(ADVERTISEMENT)

**Transition:** Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.

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

**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.

**Jesse Thorn:** It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest, Prodigy, is one of the fathers of hardcore hip-hop. As a teenager in the early '90s, he and his partner Havoc found an East Coast answer to the emerging West Coast gangster sound. As Mobb Deep, their tone was dark, eerie, and minimal. And their lyrics were cold and brutal. They didn't yell, because they didn't need to. Their words spoke for themselves. Let's take a listen to Prodigy's opening verse from “Shook Ones, Part II”. It is the epochal single from their epochal record, *The Infamous*. When Prodigy recorded it, he was barely out of his teens.

**Music:** “Shook Ones, Part II” from the album *The Infamous* by Mobb Deep.

*I got you stuck off the realness, we be the infamous*

*You heard of us, official Queensbridge murderers*

*The Mobb comes equipped for warfare, beware*

*Of my crime family who got enough shots to share*

*For all of those who wanna profile and pose*

*Rock you in your face, your brain with your nose bone*

*You all alone in these streets, cousin*

*Every man for they self in this land, we be gunning*

(Music fades out.)

**Jesse Thorn:** Prodigy spent his life struggling with sickle cell anemia. He was often in treatment or hospitalized. And in 2017, he was hospitalized for the last time. He died while in care. At the time, he was only 42 years old. And I'm replaying my interview with him, not because there is a, you know, posthumous box set or something coming out, but rather because late last year, the FDA approved a first of its kind therapy to treat and almost

eliminate the symptoms of sickle cell disease. It's a monumental development, and when I read about it, I immediately thought about Prodigy. Had it been available to him five or ten years ago, he might still be alive today.

When I talked with him in 2011, he had just written an autobiography, *My Infamous Life*. Let's get into our conversation. And by the way, our show back then was still called *The Sound of Young America*.

**Music:** Thumpy synth with a steady beat.

**Jesse Thorn:** Prodigy, welcome to *The Sound of Young America*. How are you?

**Prodigy:** How you doing, man? Thank you. I'm doing good. I'm doing real good.

**Jesse Thorn:** One of the key issues in your book and in your life is that you have sickle cell anemia. And I wonder if you could, before we start getting into the story of your life, just tell us—I mean, for starters, what that is.

**Prodigy:** Well, sickle cell anemia is a hereditary disease that's passed down from, you know, your mother and father. And basically, it's like a rare blood disorder where your blood cells change from a round shape—you know, a normal, round blood cell shape—to a sickle shape. And they start interlocking with each other and cause clotting, and it causes pain wherever that happens at. And it's like a domino effect. It just spreads out throughout your body. And the pain increases. And you know, it gets progressively worse if you don't take care of it right away. As soon as you feel the pain, you're supposed to go to the hospital or take pain medication for it.

**Jesse Thorn:** What's the first time that you remember having a sickle cell attack?

**Prodigy:** You know, I was real young, so I really didn't have a full understanding of what I was going through. You know, I knew I had something. You know, I wasn't like other kids, because my parents, they told me, you know, "You got sickle cell." And you know, all I knew—I was just in crazy pain, and that's all I knew. You know, it was just that pain, and I want to get better. I want to feel good.

**Jesse Thorn:** How did it affect your life, especially as a kid?

**Prodigy:** It made me a real angry kid. You know, I was angry at God. You know, and I used to sit there and pray to God like please take this pain away. But it's like, you know, it was nothing magical happening, nothing—it was nothing there, basically. I felt like my prayers were not being answered, you know. And it made me real moody.

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I had like an attitude problem growing up as a young child.

**Jesse Thorn:** You grew up in an interesting circumstance. You sort of grew up in a bunch of different worlds all at once. I wonder if you could tell me a little bit about your grandmother and grandfather with whom you spent a lot of time, and also about your mother and father.

**Prodigy:** Yeah, my grandmother and my grandfather—they actually met at the Cotton Club in Harlem. My grandmother was one of the first Cotton Club dancers. And my grandfather was a jazz musician. And so, he played in the band at the Cotton Club. So, you know, that's how they met, and they got married and all that. My grandmother actually started a business in the basement of her home in Jamaica, Queens. She started a dance school business. And my grandfather, you know, he had a lot of jazz albums. He was in a big band with Quincy Jones.

**Jesse Thorn:** He's actually a member of the Jazz Hall of Fame.

**Prodigy:** Yeah, he's in the Jazz Hall of Fame. And you know, growing up, I just saw a lot of famous people come into the house to see him. Like, you know, famous jazz musicians like Dizzy Gillespie and, you know, Frank Foster. You know, just different people like that. And yeah, I grew up around all of their show business.

**Jesse Thorn:** Your folks had both also been in show business and in the music industry themselves. Your father sang with a doo wop group called The Chanters, and your mother was a member of the Phil Spector group The Crystals, although she joined shortly after they had their biggest string of hits.

**Prodigy:** Yeah, yeah, I mean, it was it was definitely crazy—you know what I mean?—to hear all the stories, you know, that my mother used to tell me about, you know, touring with the Supremes, Diana Ross, and the snakes in the industry like that'll try to rob you, you know, for your credit and your money and all that.

**Jesse Thorn:** She worked for Phil Spector, who's basically one of the all-time kings of the questionable music industry guys.

**Prodigy:** Yeah, exactly. So, she's been through it, you know. She's been through doing a lot of work and getting a little for it. You know, and my father—you know, he was in that group, The Chanters. They had a couple of lukewarm records, but I think they never really took off like that, you know what I mean? But they still had the experience of the music industry. And yeah, so. You know, the whole business was just always in my family, and I grew up around that. And I saw a lot. I learned a lot at an early age about show business, about how to put on a show, about how to—you know, how the behind the scenes works to put something like that together.

**Jesse Thorn:** Your dad was a heroin addict, and you write in the book about finding out about that. How old were you?

**Prodigy:** I had to be about—maybe around seven. Around—yeah, around six, seven years old when I started noticing certain things about my father. You know, just little strange ways—you know, staying in the bathroom too long, going to a friend's house and telling me

to wait in one room while they go in another room and just little strange things I started noticing. And then you know, he finally came out and told me, you know, one day, what he was going through and what he was doing. So, that was—you know, that was kind of crazy. That was kind of crazy to see all that and just for him to tell me that. I was just like, wow, okay. Alright. Yeah.

**Jesse Thorn:** Did you even understand it as a little kid?

**Prodigy:** Yeah, I did. I did understand when he explained it to me. And you know, other family members explained it to me also, what was going on. So, yeah, they explained it to me in a way where I definitely understood what was happening.

**Jesse Thorn:** I wanna play this verse that you wrote about your dad in a song from one of your more recent solo albums. The song is called “Veteran’s Memorial, Pt. 2”. Let’s hear a little bit of it.

**Music:** “Veteran’s Memorial, Pt. 2” from the album *H.N.I.C. Pt. 2 (Collector’s Edition)* by Prodigy of Mobb Deep.

*May lightning strike me down if I'm lying*

*I miss my pops; all I got is lonely tear drops*

*And memories of him teaching me to hurt people with my bare hands*

*And how to shoot people*

*I remember me and him stuck a jewelry store*

*He did the sticking; I was in the get-a-way car*

*Pops came out with a big bag full of jewelry*

[00:10:00]

*We had a high-speed chase with Nassau County*

*I was eight years old, my pops was drama*

*They locked him up and sent me home to mama*

*(Music fades out.)*

**Jesse Thorn:** It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. You're listening to an interview I conducted with the late rapper Prodigy of Mobb Deep.

You know, I can wrap my head around the idea of your dad, you know, just being a general low- to mid-level criminal about town, you know, doing the occasional robbery and so forth. But I can't imagine the idea of him packing his kid in the passenger seat while he does it. Tell me about what was going on with your dad that he robbed this jewelry store and, you know, dropped the bag of jewelry in your lap in the passenger seat of the car.

**Prodigy:** You know, my father, he was a drinker too. He was a real heavy drinker. Like, his favorite drink was schnapps. You know what I mean? Peppermint schnapps, peach schnapps. He loved all that. So, the only way I could really make sense out of it is I think he might have been drunk that day when he did that. (*Chuckles.*) You know, 'cause it just seemed like that's not normal, you know what I mean? Like, why would you do that? And he wasn't—he was an intelligent individual, so I think maybe he was drinking that day, and he just took it a little overboard and forgot who he was with. You know what I mean? And didn't think about it until after he did it like, “Wow, I'm bugging right now.”

**Jesse Thorn:** It seems like with your sickle cell and you being small, especially as a kid, and having to be in different worlds at all these different times—your mom lived in more than one place; you went to a variety of different schools—that you had to be tough from when you were very young.

**Prodigy:** Yeah, I mean—you know, growing up, I couldn't always get involved with the activities with all the other kids, because if I overworked my body, it'd trigger my pain. You know, so there were definitely times where, you know, growing up—especially in Long Island, in Hempstead, where—you know, like other kids wanted to challenge me. You know what I mean? They wanted to, you know, see if they could push my buttons or whatever and see, you know, if I could fight or what have you and things like that. Taking my kindness for weakness or taking my quietness and laid-back style for weakness, you know. Yeah, and I've been dealing with that for basically all my life. You know what I mean? When I was young, all the way up until today.

So, I got into a few fights when I was a young kid. When I was like, you know, around that same age—six, seven years old. And my father was a karate sensei. He had his own karate school, and he taught me a few things about fighting. And he would always push me and make me fight people. You know what I mean? He was like, “Go fight that kid, you know. And take a knife with you too, just in case, you know. Don't let him beat you up, you know. Stab him.” My father would tell me things like that, and that's what I did? You know what I mean?

I would go outside, and he would make me fight. And I would beat the kid up, because I ain't trying to get beat up by my father, you know what I mean? My father—I was scared of my father. Yeah, that's how it was growing up. And the sickle cell—you know, it definitely made it where, you know, I had to prove myself a little bit.

**Jesse Thorn:** We'll be back in just a second. It's *Bullseye* from [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and NPR.

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**Transition:** Thumpy rock music.

**Jesse Thorn:** Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. If you're just joining us, we're listening back to my interview from 2011 with the late rapper Prodigy. Alongside Havoc, Prodigy founded Mobb Deep. The duo essentially defined East Coast hardcore hip-hop. Prodigy suffered from sickle cell anemia his entire life. The condition led to his death in 2017. Just last month, the FDA approved a revolutionary new treatment for sickle cell disease that could improve the lives of the approximately 100,000 people who live with it in the United States today. Let's get back into my conversation with Prodigy.

**Transition:** Buzzy, upbeat synth.

**Jesse Thorn:** You started, when you were about 11, 12 years old, getting into two things. And those were hip-hop and crime. As you describe in the book, just kind of a real grab bag of various low- to mid-level crimes. Tell me a little bit about where you were at, at that point in your life—when you were like 11, 12 years old, up until you were 13, 14 years old. When you were 14 years old, you bought your first car. What was going on with you in that period of time?

**Prodigy:** That period of time was like probably my most rebellious time. You know, my pops, he was he was on the run for a while. And so, he wasn't around for the discipline, you know. And you know, my mom, she tried her best. But I was like hanging out in the street, making new friends. I was—you know, I went from living in Long Island to moving to Queens and Lefrak City. So, I was making new friends in different neighborhoods and learning new things. And yeah, I started hanging out a lot, you know, with my new friends. And we started, you know, getting into a little more mischief than ever before. I started selling drugs when I moved to Queens. You know, because I noticed that everybody in that neighborhood out there—you know, they were doing that, and most of them were my friends. You know what I mean?

So, I wanted some of that too. I wanted to get some of that easy money and have the nice clothes and the jewelry that everybody I saw was having. And so, I started doing things like that. And I actually got caught like the second day of me selling some drugs, you know, being a crack dealer or whatever. The second day I was out there selling some drugs, I got caught by these plainclothes detectives. And they actually let me go. They took the drugs from me, and they let me go. Because I looked—I was like 12 years old, around that age. And I looked at like I was seven, probably like eight. Like, I looked at real little and young. You know what I mean? So, they was like, “What the hell you—?” They was like, “Yo, gimme that. Get outta here. Go home.” You know?

So, you know, that kind of shook me up. I was scared after that just to—to go out there and sell some drugs after that. So, I was like you know what? I'm gonna just chill from that. Yeah. But you know, I was getting into other trouble things. You know, just started drinking beer. Started smoking weed at an early age. You know what I mean? You know, 12. And you know, just hanging out real late, going to parties, you know, having sex. Just out there and getting in all kinds of trouble. Where I was you know, just manipulating things to my advantage. You know what I mean? You know, rob a few people or do whatever we had to

do. You know, or whatever we thought was fun to do. You know, to get some money. That was my badass age. (*Chuckles.*)

**Jesse Thorn:** How'd you get into emceeing?

**Prodigy:** Around that same time, you know, there was this, producer from Queensbridge named Marley Marl, and he had put out this album called *In Control*.

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And it was a compilation album of different Queensbridge artists and artists from Queens and maybe a couple artists from Brooklyn. And one of the most popular songs on that album was a song called “The Symphony”.

**Music:** “The Symphony” from the album *In Control, Volume 1* by Marley Marl. Music plays under the dialogue.

**Prodigy:** So, when I heard that, that was like the first song that really made me stop everything. Like, woah, this song is—this song is like incredible right here. Like, the lyrics that they were saying and the beat—it made me look at rap different. Like, hold up, this is something that I really want to do with myself. Like, I want to do that too. You know, I wanted that. You know, so I decided to chase after that.

Music:

*I keep on going and flowing just like a river*

*I got a whole lot to give, so I'ma give a*

*Little at a time, new trails are blazing*

*Action in effect and always stays in (yeah)*

*(Music fades out.)*

**Jesse Thorn:** Now, you started sort of working towards a career as a professional musician when you were still like a relatively young teenager, in part because you had these family members who had some connection in the music industry. And so, they knew what the deal was; they knew how someone becomes a recording artist. And the first song that you ever got that was—that you ever recorded that was released was when you were like 15 or 16 years old, and I want to play a little bit of it. It was on the *Boyz N the Hood* soundtrack on a song by an R&B group called Hi-Five. It's called “Too Young”.

**Music:** “Too Young” from the album *Boyz N the Hood Motion Picture Soundtrack* by Hi-Five.

*As time passes, I flow with the swiftness, G*

*Showing you all that are with this continuous flavor*

*You all wanna savor*

*And those without clout will have to pay for this dopeness*

*You ask who wrote this*

*And I do quote this*

*Rappers evaporate, flakes, we eliminate*

*Create the great, then I wait as I meditate*

*For those who can't keep up with dope rhyme*

*Huh! I waste no time*

*For their sake, they will come to return the life of some*

*So, for now, I guess we're just too young*

*(Music fades out.)*

**Jesse Thorn:** When do you feel like, as a teenager—or did you feel all along—like you became you, as an emcee? You got past that point of wanting to be Kool G Rap or wanting to be Craig G, and started projecting your own real self onto your songs?

**Prodigy:** It had to be right after that that *Boyz N the Hood* soundtrack came out. I went to go visit my father while he was on the run in California for another crime he had committed. And while we were out there, *Boyz N the Hood* actually was releasing to the theaters, and it came out. So, we went to see it on the—I think it might have been the premiere night. And we're in the movie theater watching it. And I had no idea about movie soundtracks. I didn't know how it works. I didn't know they was gonna play it in the movie or none of that. So, while we sitting there watching the movie, the song comes on. And me and my pops would just jump up like, “Yo! We got a song in a movie, a song in the movie!” You know what I'm saying? *(Chuckles.)*

Like, we were real excited about that and hype. Like, that felt good. And it felt like I accomplished something, like—and I really got to see the results of trying, you know what I mean? When you try hard enough to get at something, you know, it feels good when you see some results. You know what I mean? That makes you want to go further.



**Jesse Thorn:** You had some seriousness of purpose about you. It seems like one of the big turning points in your career is you had already hooked up with Havoc, who you knew from school and was a talented emcee and became your partner in what became Mobb Deep—originally called Poetical Prophets, if I'm not misremembering that.

*(Prodigy confirms.)*

And you were trying to get a deal for this group essentially by hanging out around record companies. *(Laughs.)*

**Prodigy:** Yeah. Yeah, mainly Def Jam.

**Jesse Thorn:** Like, hanging—and when I say around, I mean like literally like down at the bottom of the stairs or whatever. Or right outside the front door.

**Prodigy:** Exactly, right outside.

**Jesse Thorn:** You had like a demo tape that I guess you had on a Walkman. And tell me about when you finally got someone to listen to it who got excited.

**Prodigy:** Yeah, so what we used to do is we—you know, we made this 50-song demo tape when me and Havoc first met. We went ahead and made a demo tape. And, um—

**Jesse Thorn:** That's good, because every A&R is going to want to know that a new artist can record 49 or more songs.

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**Prodigy:** *(Laughs.)* Yeah, exactly. So, we made all these songs. It's crazy. When me and Havoc make songs, we just make a lot of songs for some reason. Ever since the beginning, you know, when we first met. So, anyway, we had this 50-song demo. And our next step was, alright, how are we going to get it to be heard? So, we looked at the back of the albums, and it had the address to all the labels. So, we was like, alright, which one we gonna pick? So, we picked Def Jam to go to first, 'cause that was like the best thing popping at the time. So, we took the address down, and we cut out of school, hopped on the train, and went down to Def Jam. So, now we're standing outside. 'Cause you know, they not letting us in, of course.

So, we're standing outside waiting for artists to come out. You know what I mean? Waiting for whoever walks out this door, we're just gonna stop them. Like, "Yo, could you please give our music a listen real quick? You know what I mean? We're rappers; we got some music we trying to get signed to Def Jam." So, we did that for a while, and a lot of people was just like, "Oh, I ain't got time for that, shorty." You know, they walked away. Some people just looked at us and ignored us and kept walking. But then one of these rappers that was affiliated with Def Jam at that time was a rapper by the name of Q-Tip, and he was from a group called The Tribe Called Quest.

So, Q-Tip actually stopped, and he was like, “Alright, I’ll give y’all a listen.” And he put the headphones on, and he listened to the music, and he actually listened to a couple of songs out there. And then he took it off, and he was like, “You know what? I like you guys.” And he’s like, “Where y’all from?” I said we’re from Queens. So, he was from Queens too, so he was like, “Alright, look, I’m gonna bring y’all inside the office. I’m gonna introduce y’all to some people. And you know, I’m gonna try to help y’all.”

So, that was a major turning point for us. You know, now we were inside. We had a connection, an insider. You know what I mean? And he brought us and made us insiders now. Like, that’s how we felt.

**Jesse Thorn:** When I was reading that part of the book, I was imagining Q-Tip like—this is the early 1990s. I was imagining Q-Tip as—Tribe dressed in 1991 or 1992 in like African print, baggy cotton pants and a dashiki and all that kind of thing. And you, I was imagining from—I was imagining my image of you maybe from like the “Shook Ones” video, which came a couple years later—but a little skinny kid in—you know, in the street fashion of that time, which was more about looking grimy than anything else.

*(Prodigy chuckles.)*

And I was imagining the two of you going up there and what an unlikely pair you were.

**Prodigy:** Yeah, I mean, you know, our style wasn’t too different at that time. ‘Cause at that time, you know, like our name was Poetical Prophets. You know what I mean? So, you know, that’s like—was the little phase that we were going through, you know, at that time. You had this rap group called the X Clan, you had this rap group—you know, The Tribe Called Quest. So, a lot of it was like real conscious rap about, you know, the Black culture and, you know, being aware of your culture and all that. So, people were rocking African medallions and different stuff.

**Jesse Thorn:** Were you rhyming about that kind of stuff?

**Prodigy:** No, we weren’t actually rhyming about that stuff. But that was like the style at that time. Like, we were rocking—we had African medallions. You know what I mean? Sometimes—that was the trend at that time; that was the most popular trend was the African medallions and like—you know, certain shirts and like African canes. Like, a lot of people had that back in the days. So, you know, we wasn’t too far from what Q-Tip was doing. You know what I mean? But we were definitely different. We weren’t that style, really. You know what I mean? We were just—you know, we would just throw on some of the trendy stuff at the time, maybe. You know what I mean? But that wasn’t really our style, really.

What we were about and what we represented in life and our actions in life didn’t really match that. *(Chuckles.)* You know what I mean?

**Jesse Thorn:** We’ll have more with the late Prodigy when we come back from a break. Stay with us. It’s *Bullseye* from [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and NPR.

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**Promo:**

**Griffin McElroy:** (*Dramatically.*) From the twisted minds that brought you *The Adventure Zone: Balance*.

[00:30:00]

And *Amnesty*, and *Graduation*, and *Ethersea*, and *Steeplechase*, and *Outrespace*, and all the other ones—the McElroy brothers and dad are proud to reveal a bold vision for the future of actual play podcasting!

It's, um—it's called *The Adventure Zone vs. Dracula*.

**Music:** High energy, gothic-inspired harpsichord music.

**Justin McElroy:** Yeah, we're gonna kill Dracula's (*a censoring crow caw*).

**Travis McElroy:** We're gonna—well, we're gonna attempt—we haven't recorded all of it yet. We will attempt to kill Dracula's (*censoring crow caw*).

**Justin:** *The Adventure Zone vs. Dracula*.

**Griffin:** Yes, a season I will be running using the D&D 5th edition rule set. And there's two episodes out for you to listen to right now. We hope you will join us. Same bat-time, same bat-channel.

**Clint McElroy:** (*Amused.*) Bats, I see what you did there.

(*Music fades out.*)

**Transition:** Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

**Jesse Thorn:** It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. You're listening to an interview I conducted with the late rapper, Prodigy, of Mob Deep.

You signed a record deal as a teenager and put out an album that flopped. It didn't flop colossally, but it was not a success, and you got dropped not that long after it came out. You know, you had some minor regional hits and so on, but you were essentially back at zero. And I wondered, as I was reading your book, whether you thought about doing something else with your life or whether it was always the plan that it was going to be you and Havoc and Mobb Deep and the music industry that was going to be your future.

**Prodigy:** Yeah, when we put out our first album, and then we had got dropped because it didn't do good, it was like devastating to us. We were like no, no, this can't be happening. We were like why did this happen? And we really had to recalibrate ourselves and really pull ourselves back down to earth and figure out why that just happened to us. And once we figured it out, you know, it was like, okay, this is how you fix it. You know what I mean? This is what we did wrong, and this is how you fix it. So, that's what we did. We just got—immediately got to work on fixing it, because we knew this is what we wanted to do with our life. You know, this is the music that we love and that we live, and we didn't want nothing else. It was this or nothing. Like, that was our attitude at that time. It was this or nothing. We didn't want nothing else. So, we had to fix the problem.

**Jesse Thorn:** You ended up making this record called *The Infamous*. And we heard earlier “Shook Ones, Part II”, but let's hear a another one of the most noteworthy tracks from that album, “Survival of the Fittest”.

**Music:** “Survival of the Fittest” from the album *The Infamous* by Mobb Deep.

*There's a war going on outside no man is safe from*

*You could run, but you can't hide forever*

*From these streets that we done took*

*You walking with your head down, scared to look*

*You shook, 'cause ain't no such things as halfway crooks*

*They never around when the beef cooks in my part of town*

*It's similar to Vietnam*

*Now we all grown up and old, and beyond the cops' control*

*They better have the riot gear ready*

*Trying to bag me and get rocked steady!*

*By the MAC one-double, I touch you*

*And leave you with not much to go home with*

*My skin is thick, 'cause I be up in the mix of action*

*If I'm not at home, puffing lye, relaxing*

*New York got a— depressed*

*So, I wear a slug-proof underneath my Guess*

*God bless my soul*

*Before I put my foot down and begin to stroll*

*Into the drama I built*

*And all unfinished beef, you will soon be killed*

*Put us together, it's like mixing vodka and milk*

*I'm going out blasting, taking my enemies with me*

*And if not, they scarred, so they will never forget me*

*Lord, forgive me, the Hennessy got me not knowing how to act*

*I'm falling, and I can't turn back*

*Or maybe it's the words from my man Killa Black*

*That I can't say, so it's left an untold fact*

*Until my death, my goal's to stay alive*

*Survival of the fit, only the strong survive*

*Yo, yo, we living this 'til the day that we die*

*Survival of the fit, only the strong survive*

*(We still living it)*

*We living this 'til the day that we die*

*Survival of the fit, only the strong survive*

*(Music fades out.)*

**Jesse Thorn:** As I was revisiting *The Infamous*, I was thinking about how different it felt from other things that were out at the time. And by the time this record dropped, there were other people talking about street life on record. You know, especially West Coast—you know, at the time, so-called gangsta rappers. But there was something very different about the tone of what you guys were talking about, in that if I listen to a West Coast gangsta record from the early 1990s, it's sort of gleeful in a way, and it's like an adventure. It's like a movie. It's exaggerated like a like a Blaxploitation movie or something.

[00:35:00]

And when I listen to your records from that time, they're dark and I guess I would say kind of sad. They feel kind of sad to me.

**Prodigy:** Yeah. I mean it definitely had that element to it. I think the reason behind that was because—number one, you know, the environment that we were in and that—you know, that we came up in, where we spent our time at, you know, where we live, basically, is—you know, it's serious, man. There's a lot of crime, murder, drugs, poverty. It's crazy. You know, poverty pushes people to do a lot of wild things. So, you know, coming from that, that whole element right there and also Queensbridge—you know, that projects right there, you know, that's the biggest projects in America. And it's like—something real special about that hood is that a lot of trends, you know, came from that hood. We started a lot of trends. Like, we created a lot of slang, styles of dress, even the way our beats sound. You know what I mean? When we really got down to it and mastered our sound, you know, and our production skills—our sound was like real sinister and dark and evil sounding almost.

Because of that, you know, the lyrics that go on top of it, we're gonna write something that matches the sound of the beat. And it's only natural that's gonna come out matching that sound, you know, and the whole lifestyle that we were living. And you know, of course like the new slang that people really never heard and all the new styles and all the stuff that, you know, we were doing that was basically like unique to that neighborhood—you know, that gave it the whole feel like this is something new right here. You know, they're doing something new. Like, you know, when Nas came out and then *The Infamous* dropped after that, it was just like, wow, these dudes is on another level right here.

**Jesse Thorn:** I want to play a song that you recorded just a couple of years ago, sort of jumping forward in the timeline ten years or so. It's from one of your solo records, and it's called “Mac 10 Handle”. I wonder if you could tell me a little bit about the place you were in when you wrote this, before we hear it.

**Prodigy:** When I wrote that song I was just thinking of a concept where it's a revenge song—like somebody out for revenge. You know what I mean? It's payback time. Like James Brown had that song, “The Big Payback”. Like, that's what this song was like. You know, it was a payback record, a revenge record.

**Jesse Thorn:** It's definitely more cr-azy than it is karate.

**Prodigy:** (*Laughs.*) Yeah, exactly.

**Jesse Thorn:** Let's hear my guest, Prodigy, and his song "Mac 10 Handle".

**Music:** "Mac 10 Handle" from the album *Return of the Mac* by Prodigy & the Alchemist.

*I sit alone in my dirty-ass room staring at candles*

*High on drugs*

*All alone with my hand on the Mac 10 handle*

*Scheming on you—*

*By myself in my four-corner room watching Hard Boiled*

*I feel like I'm crazy, my brain on drugs*

*My bullet proof on run, flats late at the night I'ma look for Cuz*

*Just ride through his hood, when I see that chump*

*I'ma jump out the truck, and dump my gun*

*You ain't never been through it, so you scared of that kinda ish*

*Hit me on a song and say "P pop a lot—"*

*Too much of that Gangsta Muzik, nah this reality rap*

*I really go through it, in interrogation rooms, I don't crack*

*I don't got none for you, talk to my lawyer*

*Nowadays is hard to kill*

*Be careful where you pull that trigger, they got you on film*

*They got eyes in the sky*

*Staring at candles, high on drugs...*

*(Music fades out.)*

**Jesse Thorn:** So, you were pulled over making an illegal U-turn by undercover police. They searched your car, found an unlicensed pistol, and you ended up with a plea bargain that put you in prison for three years. What kind of headspace were you in before you went into prison?

**Prodigy:** I was in a bad, bad headspace. I was like heading in a self-destructive direction, man. I was drinking a lot, smoking a lot of weed, real arrogant and cocky and just my priorities wasn't together, wasn't in order.

[00:40:00]

You know, I was just in a bad place, man, at that time. So, me getting locked up was actually a blessing for me. I look at it as a blessing, because it helped, you know, for me to see the light. Once you get the, you know, the rug snatched from under you—you know, I got my career, my family snatched from me. And I was forced to just sit there in that box for three years and think about what I did and how selfish I was and all that and how foolish I was. You know, it made me really see things with new eyes. Like, hold up, man. Why was I doing that? What the hell was I thinking about? I put all this in jeopardy, put myself in jeopardy. Like, I gotta change. Something got to give. And I can't ever come back in this place again. So, you know, that's what it was.

**Jesse Thorn:** Three years is a long time. Did those changes take a long time to take root in you?

**Prodigy:** No, actually, I started on that like immediately. You know, my plan was to, you know, clean myself out mentally, physically, spiritually. You know, come out physically stronger, working out every day, get my body in shape so I can be in like excellent condition. And read a lot, get my mind sharp. You know, work out that brain muscle and just like repair my relationship with God and, you know, cleanse my spirit a little bit. Because I needed that. Because I was always like real back and forth about the whole, you know, religion and God. And you know, that come from me just dealing with that pain when I was young and just growing up, living that particular street lifestyle. You know, it brought my relationship with God into question many times.

So, I wanted to repair that and fix that. And that's what I went in and did. I did all of that. You know, I wrote many albums and all that kind of stuff. But yeah. The most important part was just fixing my mind, body, and my soul. Getting it together. Like, really getting it together where, you know, I could have a future. And a successful future. You know what I mean?

**Jesse Thorn:** I want to play one last song. This is from the new EP that you just put out. It's called "Stronger". It's a beautiful song, a really pretty sample from one of my favorite Nina Simone songs.

**Music:** "Stronger" from the album *The Bumpy Johnson Album* by Prodigy of Mobb Deep.

*The moonlight shines on the New York skyline*



*Midtown is lit up, the city is mine*

*As I drive across Queensbridge, I see it clearly*

*From my POV (what do they—), this is fact not theory*

*Yeah, that rapper got money*

*But that rapper can't walk through this concrete jungle 'cause he doing it wrong*

*New York belongs to Don P*

*You could have the rest of the world, I'm good (strong) with these streets*

*Skyscrapers and housing buildings*

*I know about London, but I prefer Brooklyn*

*I know about Marseilles, but I prefer Queens*

*And while you hire cops (what do they—), I prefer my team*

*I got a powerful army, it's no need for a gun*

*You want hardcore rap? You— with the right one*

*This is maximum strength, there's no need for drugs*

*You want reality rap, homie, you got the right one*

*I'm strong enough to take the pain*

*(Music continues under the dialogue.)*

**Jesse Thorn:** Tell me a little bit about writing this record.

**Prodigy:** That record right there is like my way of showing people like that I can overcome any obstacle. I got a strong heart—strong minded, strong willed. That regardless of anything that happens, any obstacles in my way, I'm gonna make it work.

**Jesse Thorn:** Prodigy, I sure appreciate you taking the time to be on *The Sound of Young America*.

**Prodigy:** Yeah, thank you. I definitely appreciate you having me.

**Music:**

*Inflicted again and again*

*(Music fades out.)*

**Jesse Thorn:** Prodigy from 2011, when our show was still called *The Sound of Young America*. His memoir, *My Infamous Life: The Autobiography of Mobb Deep's Prodigy*, is still in print and absolutely fascinating. As we mentioned before, the FDA just approved a treatment for sickle cell disease, a condition from which Prodigy suffered for his entire life. If you or someone you know is experiencing sickle cell, we'll have a link to some resources on the *Bullseye* page at [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org).

**Transition:** Cheerful, upbeat synth.

**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 was actually up at my cabin in the southern Sierras this week, and I watched *Naked Gun 2½*.

[00:45:00]

Which is not a great movie. It's an alright movie, but it does have a great part where Leslie Nielsen says, "I've been swimming in raw sewage. I love it!"

Our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producers are Jesus Ambrosio and Richard Robey. Our production fellow at Maximum Fun is Bryanna Paz. She's on her way out, though. Thank you, Bryanna, for all your hard work. We get booking help from Mara Davis. Our interstitial music is by DJW, also known as Dan Wally. Our theme song is called "Huddle Formation". It was written and recorded by The Go! Team. Our thanks to them and to their label, Memphis Industries.

*Bullseye* is on Instagram where we share interview highlights and pictures and behind the scenes looks and so forth. We are [@BullseyeWithJesseThorn](https://www.instagram.com/BullseyeWithJesseThorn). We are also on Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook. And I think that's about it. Just remember, all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

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

*(Music fades out.)*

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