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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. Meshell Ndegeocello has made a career as a bassist, multi-instrumentalist, and vocalist. She's been performing professionally for over 30 years and is responsible for hits like “If That's Your Boyfriend (*He Wasn't Last Night*)” and the John Mellencamp duet, “Wild Night”.

**Music:** “Wild Night” from the album *Dance Naked* by John Mellencamp and Meshell Ndegeocello.

*As you brush your shoes*

*You stand before your mirror*

*And you comb your hair*

*Grab your coat and hat*

*And you walk the streets*

*Trying to remember, baby*

*All those wild nights breeze through your mind*

*And everything looks so complete*

*When you're walking down on the street...*

(Music fades out.)

**Jesse Thorn:** Ndegeocello has recorded albums spanning folk, rap, rock, blues, you name it. Just a few weeks ago, she earned a Grammy for Best Alternative Jazz Album. *The Omnichord Real Book* isn't exactly jazz, though. It's sort of genre-less. It touches on neo soul,

funk, afrobeat, hip hop, and experimental music. It is also unmistakably 100% Meshell Ndegeocello.

**Music:** “Clear Water” from the album *The Omnichord Real Book* by Meshell Ndegeocello.

*Pain colors everything I touch*

*I really, really, really love my pain so much (hurrah!)*

*(Love's gonna getcha, love's gonna getcha)*

*Now if you're living in a glass house, say it with me now*

*Don't throw no stones*

*If you're living in a glass house, say it with me now*

*Don't throw no stones*

*You gotta keep it clean*

*You gotta keep it clear...*

**Jesse Thorn:** When I talked to Meshell in 2009, she'd recently released her seventh album, *The World has Made Me the Man of My Dreams*. Here's a song from it, “Lovely Lovely”.

**Music:** “Lovely Lovely” from the album *The World has Made Me the Man of My Dreams* by Meshell Ndegeocello.

*With your fingertips, when you kiss my lips*

*I know that you love me*

*The way you move your hips*

*I know that you love me*

*(Music fades out.)*

**Jesse Thorn:** Meshell, welcome to the show.

**Meshell Ndegeocello:** Thank you for having me.

**Jesse Thorn:** It's great to have you here. So, you were born in Germany, right? 'Cause your dad was in the service. When did you move to DC?

**Meshell Ndegeocello:** Oh, not until I was about—I guess like 10/11, but the formative years.

**Jesse Thorn:** Were you between places before that?

**Meshell Ndegeocello:** Oh yeah, yeah. We moved around quite a bit. But I'm definitely a southern person. I lived mostly in Hampton, Virginia; Alexandria, Virginia; Richmond, Virginia. Then we came to DC/Maryland area. So, I feel that's my home.

**Jesse Thorn:** When did you start playing music?

**Meshell Ndegeocello:** About 14, I got the bug. (*Chuckles.*) My brother played the guitar, my guitar; my father plays music as well. Instruments were always around in the house, so it was a good outlet. It was something I could do alone or with my brother, so I enjoyed, you know, picking up an instrument and trying to express myself.

**Jesse Thorn:** The United States has such a national culture that it's very odd for there to be really unique regional art forms. One of them is, you know—I mean there's club music in Baltimore and there's go-go in DC. Did you have go-go in mind when you started playing the bass?

**Meshell Ndegeocello:** No—well, it's the first gig I ever got was playing in a go-go band. It's just a natural part of my nurturing. But you're right, that music can and so far has only existed there. So, it's a very—how do you say it? Provincial experience.

**Jesse Thorn:** Well, with the possible exception of doing the butt. (*Laughs.*)

**Meshell Ndegeocello:** Yeah, that's about it, but I don't know if that's going to be a classic. I'll see in about 20 years from now and see what happens.

**Jesse Thorn:** See if people are still doing the butt?

**Meshell Ndegeocello:** Yeah, I doubt it, but yeah. But it's definitely influenced my playing. Plus, I liked hip hop, so I liked the—the go-go was more of you were trying to really be an MC and get the crowd involved in a different way than it was, you know, spewing out your thoughts.

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So, I like the combination of both.

**Jesse Thorn:** Did you ever aspire to be an MC?

**Meshell Ndegeocello:** Oh, yeah, I think so. When I was young, I was like—I loved Just-Ice and KRS-One and Milk and MC Lyte. And it's—sure, there's something in me that thought I could. But now I really—I find that genre to—it's so commercialized, it's hard to find stuff that I can really connect with. But more so, I'm a bassist and a songwriter. I think that's what I've grown into or developed into.

**Jesse Thorn:** When you were really young and still living in DC and you first started gigging, was it weird? Were people surprised that there was a—you know, a teenage girl playing with the go-go band?

**Meshell Ndegeocello:** Definitely, I'd get that, but I tried to maintain something that my brother and other friends tried to instill in me. Which was don't be good, because—you know, don't get them to say you're good for a girl, just get them to say, “Wow, you know, you're good, no matter, you know, what you are.” (*Laughs.*) So, that was my main focus. But I would just, you know, ignore the haters and, you know, just try to do my thing.

**Jesse Thorn:** One of the amazing things about DC go-go is it's this world that is completely self-contained. So, you can really be in a band and be a real working musician, playing lots of gigs, and never go more than, you know, 45 miles outside of Washington, DC. What was it that led you to step outside of that world?

**Meshell Ndegeocello:** Socially, it was very limiting. You're like a big fish in a small pond. And I'd rather be the little fish in this amazing world and see different things. I was inspired to travel. I went to New York, I think in '95, and it just blew my mind. I don't know. My thoughts were bigger. I had the first Prince record, and I said to myself, “I just want to make records. I want to make records and travel around and play.” I didn't really like school too much. Didn't really fit in with what was going on there. And like I liked go-go, but I also liked Rush.

*(They laugh.)*

And you know, so I just needed to get out and make new friends and try some different things.

**Jesse Thorn:** Sometimes when you're a bass player, maybe it just comes with the instrument. You get a Rush CD that's just glued to the back of the bass. Comes with a free Rush CD?

**Meshell Ndegeocello:** Exactly. Yeah, see, I like stuff like that and PIL, and I liked a wide range of music as a kid. And I just, yeah.

**Jesse Thorn:** We have so much more to get into. Stay with us. It's *Bullseye* from [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and NPR.

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

**Jesse Thorn:** This is *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is the Grammy-winning bassist and singer Meshell Ndegeocello.

Being a bass player is a really particular thing. We had Raphael Saadiq in here a couple weeks ago and talked to him. He's another great bass player. What do you—how do you think the fact that the bass was the instrument that you picked up has changed your musical path?

**Meshell Ndegeocello:** Yeah, the bass player is the foundation. It's the only person that can move around on stage, kind of see what's going on. We make—we're the root of the chord. We're also rhythmical. It just made me a more solid musician. And as a singer, it's just—it's nice to be able to know the foundation of the music. So, yeah, I am a big fan of bass players. *(Laughs.)*

**Jesse Thorn:** So, when I listen to your records, I'm very aware that you're a bass player, because the bass is really the center of your work. I mean, even to some extent on like *Bitter* or something, which is a much, much softer and more guitar-oriented record.

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What do you think are the opportunities that you have, you know, musically and also sort of texturally as a bass player when you're making records? What is it that you can do that somebody else might miss?

**Meshell Ndegeocello:** I'm always thinking of the colors. Not the line I played, or how fast, or is it funky or groovy, or anything. I'm just thinking about the tone, how the bass hits you coming out of your speaker or out of your headphones. I think that's—I pay attention to details like that, just how it sounds and feels coming at you.

Yeah, as a bass player, I just feel it gives me the ear. I listen to everything. I listen—I mean, I have to listen to harmony and the drums. I am the center of it all. I keep those two things together. Plus, I feel like the bass player is the humble band member. Like, when you play the guitar, you're the singer. Singer, you want to be up front, and you have to *(laughs)* have a sort of a command. The bass player is just okay with like sitting in the groove, sitting in the cut, not causing too much trouble, you know. I'm definitely not the hype man in the band, I'm just the gentle one keeps it all together.

**Jesse Thorn:** Can you think of a song on this most recent record that had a really particular color that you were shooting for?

**Meshell Ndegeocello:** Oh, yeah, definitely. “Article 3” is the one that is like—I guess, I mean to me it was—I wanted it to be like, just a sonic barrage. *(Chuckles.)* A rhythmical and sonic barrage on the ears. Fat, yet edgy. Like, that's what I was trying to get.

**Music:** “Article 3” from the album *The Omnichord Real Book* by Meshell Ndegeocello.

*You wanna lock me away, 'cause I hurt*

*I was a sad and lonely child*

*You're embarrassed of me, because I'm ugly...*

*(Music fades out.)*

**Jesse Thorn:** It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is musician Meshell Ndegeocello.

Shortly after high school, you got pregnant and had a child. How did that change the—that's a very difficult place to be in when you have this idea of, you know, being free and traveling around. How did it change the trajectory of your life?

**Meshell Ndegeocello:** Oh, I just took him with me. I think the thing about—*(sighs)* yeah, I struggle with this topic. I mean... having a child when you're young is very difficult. But at the same time, I think my naivete allowed me to go, "I can make it whatever experience I want." So, I had great friends and family when I couldn't be there all the time to be with him. But I would just take him with me. He's been on the road quite a bit. I'm sure his memoirs will be different.

*(They laugh.)*

We'll have a different view. But it just changed me, because it wasn't all about me, and I knew I had to be able to take care of myself and another person. But I love children. I love seeing the world through their eyes and watching them, because everything's so fresh and new. And you forget that by the time you're 12, and you start trying to have your own self. But I enjoyed it. I love children. It was hard at times. I'm sure people say, well, in hindsight, do you think you do it differently? And I really don't. I'm grateful for the experience. I loved it.

**Jesse Thorn:** When did you start performing under your own name, performing as a solo artist?

**Meshell Ndegeocello:** Oh, 19/20. I got to New York. I joined the BRC, the Black Rock Coalition. I had some gigs, had some ideas. I would write songs a lot. I was always interested in recording. Once I realized college and getting out of high school wasn't going to be really my *(chuckles)* strong point I went to an engineering facility that, you know, gave you a certificate. You learned to be an engineer and those little skills.

**Jesse Thorn:** I thought you were gonna say you went to an engineering facility, like to get robotic arms or something.

*(They laugh.)*

**Meshell Ndegeocello:** No, no, no, I went to—I studied with Bob Yesbeck, this amazing engineer. He mixed Christopher Cross records, stuff like that. And I went and learned some

skills. And once I could record my own music, that was it for me. I would just be—I created my own little world and did my own thing.

**Jesse Thorn:** When you signed your first record contract, do you feel like you had a sense of who you were and who you wanted to be?

**Meshell Ndegeocello:** Ugh, not at all. And I know I thought I'd never—I just turned 40. I thought I'd never be one of those people that would be like, you know, (*dramatically*) “I look back then, and yeah, I knew what I wanted.”

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But no, I still don't. You never do. I just feel like I'm on this ride. And I take it as it comes. Some things are disappointing, and some things are great! But you're never done developing, I guess, as a person or a human being. You know, I can only look back and say I was really excited. I could have done things differently, had a better lawyer.

(*They chuckle.*)

Been a little bit more savvy about some issues. But the experience was great. It's gotten me here. You know. All I knew is I wanted to play. That's all I knew. And I knew I had these ideas. I love—the only thing I miss about youth is the... sort of this inner feeling of you can do anything. And that's how I—that's the only thing I think I felt. I was like I can do anything. Just, let's go record. Let's go do something. I've always been just focused on the music.

**Jesse Thorn:** We'll have more with Meshell Ndegeocello after a quick break. When we return, we'll talk about the time that Meshell shared the bill with Blackalicious and Ozomatli, and how I—a young, hair-full Jesse Thorn—was in the audience. Stay with us. It's *Bullseye* from [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and NPR.

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**Promo:**

**Music:** Surreal, drone-y synth.

**Doug Duguay:** My name's Doug Duguay, and I'm here to talk about my podcast in the middle of the one you're listening to. It's called *Valley Heat*, and it's about my neighborhood, the Burbank Rancho Equestrian District. The center of the world when it comes to foosball, frisbee golf, and high-speed freeway roller-skating. And there's been a Jaguar parked outside on my curb for 10 months. I have no idea who owns it. I have a feeling it's related to the drug drop that was happening in my garbage can a little over a year ago. And if this has been a boring commercial, imagine 45 minutes of it. Okay, *Valley Heat*. It's on every month on [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) or wherever you get podcasts. Check it out, but honestly, skip it.

**Music:** Buzzy sci-fi music.

**Narrator:** (*Voice echoing.*) These are the chronicles of the Rancho Equestrian District in Burbank, California. These are the events taking place in my house and around my—

(*Audio fades out.*)

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

**Jesse Thorn:** Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. We're listening back to my conversation from 2009 with bassist and songwriter Meshell Ndegeocello. She just won a Grammy for her album, *The Omnichord Real Book*. On her second album, *Peace Beyond Passion*, Ndegeocello recorded a song about a gay man who is harassed, beaten, and ostracized from his family. She titled it “Leviticus”, colon, then a derogatory slur used for gay men. I asked her about the song.

**Meshell Ndegeocello:** Yeah, just singing about what I knew about. I mean, before there was Matthew Shepard, I had a friend of mine who didn't survive a beating and being bashed. And so, I just—yeah, it was just something that hit me. And plus, in my life learning about who I was, and people judge you and never really get to know you. I just wanted to just tell my story.

**Music:** “Leviticus: F-ggot” from the album *Peace Beyond Passion* by Meshell Ndegeocello.

*His mother would pray*

*Save him, save him, save him from this life*

*His mother would pray*

*Save him (yes she would), save him from this life*

*(Down on her knees)*

*Save him (save me from this life)*

*Save him, save him, now...*

(*Music fades out.*)

**Jesse Thorn:** Correct me if I'm wrong, but you've been for some time out as bisexual.

**Meshell Ndegeocello:** Yeah, yeah. I'm just a human being looking for love.



**Jesse Thorn:** Did the way that your identity was affecting your life change between when you made that first record and when you made that second record and moved on and you moved forward in your career? Did it feel different to you? Were you struggling with different issue?

**Meshell Ndegeocello:** Oh yeah, just in your personal life.

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Just the judgment. The first record was, I guess saw more as R&B. And at that time, R&B was seen as, quote/unquote, Black music. I hate these generalizations. But people of color tend to be the most homophobic. (*Chuckles.*) And so, it was difficult to hear some of the things I would get from people in interviews or being out while I played. Plus, the only thing I have learned from that—and especially looking at society now, the things that we deem as entertainment is these reality show, personal life things. You're looking into somebody. And the only thing I come away with is privacy, especially in your interpersonal relationships. Because I realized no one was listening to the fact that I could play the bass or write songs. That became the focal point of everything.

And so, I mean, by the third record, I became bored with it. And it was hard that that was all anyone would ever focus on.

(*Music fades in.*)

**Jesse Thorn:** The third record was called *Bitter* and was pretty much universally hailed as being spectacular. It's also very, very different from the first two.

**Meshell Ndegeocello:** Well, hopefully the music hits people with like this could be you. I'm just trying to create something that other people can have an experience and a feeling with.

**Music:** “Bitter” from the album *Bitter* by Meshell Ndegeocello.

*You push me away bitterly*

*My apologies fall on your deaf ears*

*You curse my name bitterly*

(*Music fades out.*)

**Jesse Thorn:** I saw you play a show in in Santa Cruz when I was in college. And this would I guess be six years ago, something like that. And it was you and Blackstar and Mos Def and (*inaudible*) and Ozomatli. It was one of the most surreal concert experiences I've ever had, because as I recall, maybe you were the feature act. I think you might have been the middle act in that show. It was Santa Cruz, so there's all these hippies there to see Ozomatli. And there's all these, you know, kids literally with backpacks at the time. They weren't—it wasn't

just a metaphor, backpack rap, at the time. People would wear their backpack to a show. There to see Blackstar.

And when you stepped onto the stage, all these kind of butch ladies pushed their way up to the front, right? And it was really something, because it was these three—you, Blackstar, and Ozomatli—aesthetically are not too far apart from each other. But you—

**Meshell Ndegeocello:** I love Ozo Motley.

**Jesse Thorn:** I think by virtue of the fact that you've been so long performing as an out bisexual, you have this very particular audience. And it's certainly not the totality of your audience. I wonder if you feel in any way like responsible to that audience or feel like it's—in any way. Like, if you feel like having that particular audience—as opposed to just, you know, the hippies who go see Ozomatli or whatever.

**Meshell Ndegeocello:** I don't know. Yeah, I kind of suck at that actually. I was, uh—

**Jesse Thorn:** (*Laughs.*) In what way?

**Meshell Ndegeocello:** Yeah, at the giving—you know. I guess I don't—I'm just a musician. I'm just like a—I'm just, yeah. I'm just a singer-songwriter. I'm just a human being, and I guess—again, I struggle with that. Like, generalizations. Or—because, I guess last night I played at the House of Blues, and there are people expecting me to be just like *Plantation Lullabies* or just like *Bitter*, like that same person or personality that they've perceived. But yeah, all I can do is be myself. I'm like a 40-year-old human being. I just have other things to offer now, and there's no way you could get the whole scope of me in a 70-minute show.

(*They chuckle.*)

So, do I have a responsibility? I think my first responsibility is to the music and playing and having quality, being a quality musician and singing the best I can. And all I can hope for, inshallah, is that people get a good feeling from it too. I think—I'm not trying to go to Vegas later on in life and like rehash the past. That's not my goal.

**Jesse Thorn:** (*Playfully.*) You're not? I would have guessed. I would have guessed!

**Meshell Ndegeocello:** Yeah, at 50 I hope like, you know, I play with—

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You know, maybe I can get some gigs with Neil Young or something. Or play with some electronica band from London and just hang in the back. You don't have to see me. I'm just—you know, I'm hoping for other things, you know. Just trying to do other things. Be as open and curious as possible.

**Jesse Thorn:** You've played with many, many different artists in many genres as a session player, and you've worked with many artists as a producer, and et cetera, et cetera. You made a jazz record a couple of years ago. What are the new horizons that you're exploring now at 40? What's interesting to you?

**Meshell Ndegeocello:** Well, sometimes just playing the piano and having a tape recorder and recording the sounds that are just out in the world naturally. What interests me now? I really like movies. I like scoring. I want to score something interesting, probably something abstract. I'd like to make some abstract scores for abstract cinema. Things that were just propelled by visuals, not necessarily a linear storyline. I think I would have more interest in that.

**Jesse Thorn:** Well, Meshell, we'll stay tuned.

**Meshell Ndegeocello:** Oh, yeah. Thank you. Thank you so much for having me here.

**Jesse Thorn:** No problem! Thank you so much.

Meshell Ndegeocello, her Grammy-winning album, *The Omnichord Real Book*, is available to buy or stream everywhere. Here's another song from that record. It's called "Virgo".

**Music:** "Virgo" from the album *The Omnichord Real Book* by Meshell Ndegeocello.

*They're calling me back to the stars*

*Deep outer space*

*I can see*

*I can hear you*

*(Music continues under the dialogue.)*

**Jesse Thorn:** It really rips. I can't recommend it enough. And in fact, I will add to that that she has posted some videos of her and her band playing the songs from the album in studio on her YouTube page, and they are so cool. I mean, the virtuosity in the band is so extraordinary, and the way that it is bounded by the tightness and funkiness of those songs. And man, their restraint as well is just—it's a beautiful thing to watch in addition to listen to.

**Music:**

*Guide my way, guide my way, guide my way*

*They're calling me back to the stars*

*Deep outer space*

*They're calling me*

*(Music continues under the dialogue.)*

**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, where each and every one of us are finding out if there are any holes in our roofs. Because, boy, has it been raining.

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 Daniel Huecias. 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. Thanks to The Go! Team. Thanks to their label, Memphis Industries.

*Bullseye* is on Instagram, [@BullseyeWithJesseThorn](#), so follow us there. You can also find us on Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook. I think that's about it. Just remember, all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

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

*(Music fades out.)*

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