[00:00:00]

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

Promo: *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of 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. It's not that Shabaka Hutchings is eclectic. I mean, yes—his music blends jazz and calypso, dancehall, hip-hop, African folk music. But that alone isn't what makes him so great. Shabaka was born in the UK, raised mostly in Barbados. And he studied classical music in college, not jazz. That's interesting, but again, it is not the reason you should listen to his music. You should listen to the music of Shabaka Hutchings, because he makes brilliant, beautiful songs. His music is vivid, complex, and hypnotic.

Music: "Play Mass" from the album *Lest We Forget What We Came Here to Do* by Sons of Kemet—a rhythmic, brassy piece with a weaving melody.

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: As the leader of the bands Shabaka and the Ancestors and Sons of Kemet, Hutchings found ways to speak using the language of all of those genres and make something totally unique. When he writes a piece like, say, "Go My Heart, Go to Heaven", you hear the harmonized sax of Ethiopian jazz legend Mulatu Astatke. But the energy is different. It's cooler and more romantic. Even maybe a little disorienting.

Music: "Go My Heart, Go to Heaven" from the album *We Are Sent Here By History* by Shabaka and the Ancestors—a bluesy, lilting tune.

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: Or in Sons of Kemet. It's a band a little more informed by his upbringing in Barbados. You might hear a dub song, performed almost entirely by horns, and then a sax solo.

Music: A Sons of Kemet song with a vibrant sax line.

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: Shabaka recently hung up his saxophone, maybe for good, maybe just for a little while. He's playing flute these days, and it's different. A little more subdued, but just as compelling. Like on this song, "End of Innocence", from his upcoming solo album.

Music: “End of Innocence” from the album *Perceive Its Beauty, Acknowledge Its Grace* by Shabaka—a wistful woodwind melody.

Jesse Thorn: When I talked to Hutchings back in 2021, Sons of Kemet had just put out a record called *Black to the Future*. Here's a song from it. This is “To Never Forget the Source.”

Music: “To Never Forget the Source” from the album Black to the Future by Sons of Kemet, an upbeat, playful song with prominent brass.

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: Shabaka Hutchings, welcome to *Bullseye*. I'm so happy to have you on the show.

Shabaka Hutchings: Oh yeah, thanks for having me. It's a real pleasure.

Jesse Thorn: Your first instrument was the clarinet. How did you end up with a clarinet in your hand?

Shabaka Hutchings: Well, I went to school in Barbados. I moved to Barbados from England when I was six, and that's where I picked up the clarinet. And in the school bands there, you normally have a whole bunch of clarinets. So, you'll have like 12 to 14 clarinets in the front row, then like two saxophones, two trumpets, two trombones, a drum kit, maybe a piano, bass. So, they just had a load of clarinets, I guess, because they're cheap. And you know, you get them in the kind of cadet bands, also playing the marching stuff. I really wanted a saxophone, because I thought it was cool. But they were just like, “We’ve only got two saxophones, and you're getting a clarinet.”

Jesse Thorn: So, what kind of music was being played by this band of two saxophones and 14 clarinets? *(Chuckles.)*

Shabaka Hutchings: Absolutely everything. Like, you know, we used to play like Calypso songs. We'd play stuff like “Pomp and Circumstance”, the kind of old colonial hits. We'd play some classical stuff. We played reggae numbers. It was—you know, it was one of those like school variety bands where we just got arrangements and just played them.

Jesse Thorn: I don't know if this is the case in Barbados, it is in the United States, that “Pomp and Circumstance” plays when everyone is doing like a graduation processional. You know, everyone wearing their mortarboards and accepting their diplomas. And I'm just imagining right now that scene—you know, that very dignified scene—but also with the addition of 14 clarinets.

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Shabaka Hutchings: Oh yeah, it was a joyful sound if you like clarinets.

Jesse Thorn: *(Laughs.)* What kind of music was playing in your house when you were a kid?

Shabaka Hutchings: Well, my mother used to play a lot of calypso and soca, reggae, but then a lot of soul. So, I remember people like, you know, Millie Jackson being played or people like Luther Vandross. But the radio was always on. And you know, that was the '90s. So, on the radio was a lot of kind of hip-hop from that era. So, I remember hearing—and actually—no, I actually remember it being really diverse. I remember even hearing like a group like Westside Connection on the radio in Barbados. Outkast, Nas was there. Then you had lots of lover's rock and people like Toni Braxton, Brian McKnight—which was really fundamental to me, because I used to really listen to the melodies, and I remember playing along with the melody to things like, you know, "Back at One" by Brian McKnight or "Unbreak My Heart" by Toni Braxton, and that was my first real introduction to playing the clarinet. It wasn't the repertoire that I had to play for the exams. It was me going home and then just playing along to the radio with all these melodies that I was—you know, that I loved.

Jesse Thorn: Yeah, I do. I'm pumped about the idea of Babyface going back and remixing his production hits, just adding one clarinet.

Shabaka Hutchings: Oh yeah. *(Chuckles.)* Or 14.

Jesse Thorn: *(Laughing.)* Yeah, or 14 for that matter. Did you grow up with MCs around you? Was there native hip-hop going on in Barbados?

Shabaka Hutchings: Not at that time, no. It was just on the radio, and I used to just record all the songs that I could and just play them back. And I used to get in some trouble. I remember actually the guidance counselor had this ongoing feud with me, 'cause I kept on—I was a massive gangsta rap fan. And I used to learn all the words and write them down and just kind of recite them to myself in class. And one day she found my—she opened my desk, and she found my stash of hardcore hip-hop lyrics. And she brought out "The Ten Crack Commandments" by Notorious B.I.G., and she kind of read them aloud. *(Chuckles.)* And I got into lots of trouble. She like forced me out of the class, and I was in detention for weeks. And you know, she was saying this guy is, you know, destructive, and look at the lyrics and all of this stuff.

And there's nothing I could say in my defense, other than I'm playing music in your school band. So, I can't be all bad.

Jesse Thorn: *(Laughs.)* Yeah, I feel like Biggie in particular loses a lot on the page, you know what I mean?

Shabaka Hutchings: Yeah. I mean, if you read it without the context and without the rhythm and the whole thing, it becomes—it has a different resonance if you just read the written lyrics, you know?

Jesse Thorn: It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. I'm talking with Shabaka Hutchings. He's a jazz musician and composer. He has a new album coming out under his own name. It's called *Perceive Its Beauty, Acknowledge Its Grace*.

What else do you remember memorizing or transcribing?

Shabaka Hutchings: So, I was a massive Tupac fan. I had pictures of him on my—you know, posters on my wall. I had kind of stickers on my books. So, *Me Against the World* was one of my favorite albums when that came out. I remember when Nas's *Illmatic* came out, you know, loving that. You know, the track—what's it? "Represent", I think it is.

(Jesse affirms.)

Toward the end of the album. This—yeah, this kind of—I didn't see it as transcribing. You know, I didn't see it as even learning. I just loved it and played them all the time, these songs all the time, and then just knew them. Outkast's *ATLiens* was another, you know, seminal one for me where I just knew the album really well, 'cause I just listened to it constantly.

Jesse Thorn: Yeah, I feel like *ATLiens*—in fact, all three of those records that you just mentioned. I feel like *Illmatic* and *ATLiens* and also the Outkast album *Aquemini*—like, those are all records that I can listen to at any time. Just I'm glad to. Like, they're albums that I heard when I was 12 and that now that I'm recently 40, I can still play over and over and over in a way that I, you know, can't necessarily with a lot of the records I loved when I was 12. *(Laughs.)*

Shabaka Hutchings: Yeah, they've definitely stood the test of time.

Jesse Thorn: When you moved to Barbados from England—your folks are from Barbados, but you were born in the UK. When you moved to Barbados from England when you were six, did you want to move? Did you like moving?

Shabaka Hutchings: I can't really remember. And I think at that age, it wasn't really a matter of wanting to. It was just something that happened. I remember feeling sad that, you know, like friends that I'd recently started to really form relationships with for the first time, I had to leave. But then it's like, especially when you get to somewhere like Barbados—

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—which is such a radically different environment. It's like all your senses are overwhelmed with the difference. So, there's no real time or space for sentimentality. There's like the sun. Everything that you see is—you know, there's different colors, there's the beach, there's the carnival, there's— So, yeah, there wasn't a sense of mourning. There was just a sense of the new. New environment. I always knew the plan. That's the thing. I think my life has been a life of plans. Like, my mother always explained to me why we were going. Like, we were going because I would get a better education there than I would in England, considering, you know, our social and economic circumstance. And then I was always going to come back to Britain when I was 16, do my A levels, take a gap year so that I've had the three years until I

get home status. ‘Cause if you're out the country for a certain time, you lose it. And then I would go to university. So, I always worked towards those kind of imaginative goals.

Jesse Thorn: Did you like those goals?

Shabaka Hutchings: Um, it wasn't a matter of liking them or not liking them. And I guess it's strange if—you know, like to say, and I kind of find myself while I'm saying them going, “No, did you like them or not like them?” They were just—it was just what happened, you know? It was just me and my mother, and it was like we were a team. Like, we were in it together. We’re gonna go to Britain, you know. At this point, you're gonna do your A Levels. And I was like yeah, cool. That's what it was. It was just about that sense of striving for something. You know, there was always that sense instilled in me that, you know, we're working towards something. It wasn't just a case of we're in a specific place, because we’re, you know, native to that space.

Jesse Thorn: You were an only child. That must have led to a fair amount of at home by yourself clarinet time.

Shabaka Hutchings: Yeah. I mean, I love being an only child. I can't imagine it any other way. I'm really kind of happy being by myself. And you know, I just remembered—you know, my mother didn't let me watch the TV in the week. She didn't let me play video games. So, I only had TV on the weekend. And I mean, when everyone had like a Sega or something or Nintendo X, she finally let me have a Gameboy with *Tetris*. You know? And her whole thing was like, “You know, you've got better things to do. Like, you can read these books, you can play your clarinet.” And I really enjoyed playing the clarinet. I love the physical feeling of it. I love playing to the radio. So, you know, that's what I did. And I was—you know, I was really content. You know, I didn't feel like there was anything lacking.

Jesse Thorn: I have a friend and colleague named John Hodgman, who's a comedian. And he has—he's an only child. And in one of his acts, he made himself the president of the Only Children, Super Smart, Afraid of Conflict, Narcissist Club.

(They laugh.)

Shabaka Hutchings: Sounds about right.

Jesse Thorn: Yeah, there is a special thing to being an only child where you do like learn to live within yourself, but it can also be hard to figure out what to do when you're outside of that context.

Shabaka Hutchings: Yeah. I mean, my mother is an only child also, so it's like two generations of only children. So, it's pretty deeply ingrained.

Jesse Thorn: More with Shabaka Hutchings after the break. Stick around. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

(ADVERTISEMENT)

Transition: Thumpy, playful synth.

Jesse Thorn: Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is Shabaka Hutchings. He's a saxophone player and flautist, as well as a composer. He fronts the bands Sons of Kemet and Shabaka and the Ancestors. He's one of my favorite jazz musicians. Later this month, Hutchings will release a brand-new solo record. It's made up of mostly flute compositions. It's called *Perceive Its Beauty, Acknowledge Its Grace*. When I talked with Hutchings in 2021, his group Sons of Kemet had just released their tremendous album, *Black to the Future*. Let's get back into our conversation.

At what point did you switch from the very cool clarinet to the extremely cool saxophone?

Shabaka Hutchings: *(Chuckles.)* There was never a solid switch. I always wanted a saxophone. And in the last year of being in Barbados, I was able to borrow one to play in the kind of Calypso tents, which was a big achievement. And the Calypso tents are these—I guess Calypso variety shows—

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—is the best way of putting it, where you have like 12—10 to 12 calypsonians who do a song each. And then there's a break, and then they do another song. And the whole island will come out to see, you know, one of maybe 20 of these tents that happen all across the island. And then judges pick the best of them to go into Calypso Semi-Finals and then Finals. So, I was playing in the band in my last year of Barbados, so it meant playing—you know—every week. You know, playing for all of these calypsonians. And you know, they don't use clarinets. I was able to borrow a saxophone.

And from that point, I was like, "I need to get a saxophone no matter what." So, I got to England, and I was able to get a real crappy saxophone at 16, practice really hard on it. And then I did a church concert when I was about 17, and we earned about £1,800 in £3 tickets in a church that could only fit about—you know—100 people. So, it was really selling tickets to people that would never be able to come. My mom was, you know, selling tickets to people in the grocery store in the lines. She would just turn around and show them the program and say, you know, "Come—you know, give me £3. My son's trying to buy a clarinet."

(Jesse chuckles.)

So, at that point, you know, I had a saxophone and was practicing it. But I was a clarinet player, and my passion was the clarinet. You know, I started that journey. So, I decided that actually I wanted to see it through. So, I studied the classical degree on clarinet, in university—not because I wanted to be a classical clarinetist, but I just—I thought if I started this procedure of learning the instrument, I wanna see what it is to actually study it in its native habitat. You know, i.e., the conservatoire—and see if I can actually do the work to, you know, to hang with the kind of greats of that instrument.

Jesse Thorn: Did you at some point decide that you wanted to be a jazz musician in deciding that you did not want to be a professional classical musician?

Shabaka Hutchings: No. I really—and this is really the honest answer. I really just didn't think about it that much. I just came out of college and started gigging, whatever I could do to make—you know, to make money. I didn't know what it was to be a jazz musician, because I didn't do the jazz course. I didn't feel like my kind of chord changes playing was as good as everyone else who did the course and was practicing changes and giant steps and "Old Cherokee" and all these tunes, you know, day after day.

So, I just thought, you know, I'm never going to be as good as those jazz players who really, really learned the language and the tradition. But I've got a passion for music, and I know how to—you know, how to speak my mind musically. So, you know, I'll just do what I can do. And even up to now, it's like the fact that people call me a jazz musician—you know, I find it strange, because I've always seen my defects. If you're looking at the specific, you know, music—like, if you're looking at bebop as a specific form, I feel like my language is limited within that specific form. But my understanding of the music, in terms of how much I've listened to it and understand of the inner workings of it on a creative level, I think is large.

You know, like we can go into another conversation about the word jazz and the limitations about, you know. And I think my misgivings about how I was placed within that history came from actually the thing that, from my knowledge, musicians like Miles Davis and Charlie Parker, Coltrane, why they've tried to actually reject the term. Because it is not—it felt like, if you understand a certain vocabulary, you are of that type of musician. As opposed to if you had a certain approach to creativity and to an awareness of the past and a way of molding the past to your personal journey.

Jesse Thorn: Let's play a little bit of the first single from this new Sons of Kemet record. The album's called *Black to the Future*, and the song is called "Hustle".

Music: "Hustle" from the album *Black to the Future* by Sons of Kemet.

I've been doing milage with my phone on silent

Hear no, see no, felt the violence

God got my blessings on autopilot

Why ain't no one tell me peace of mind was pricey?

I could dance with the devil, but that's unlikely

Might go broke, but that's unlike me

I was born from the mud with the hustle inside me

Born from the mud with the hustle inside me

Feeding my soul

I go make nothing something

Show you my lows…

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: So, I'm very interested in the intersection between hip-hop and jazz, because—I think we're pretty similar age. And when I was a kid, there was a lot of very corny talk about the intersections between hip-hop and jazz. This is sort of right up there with people saying that rappers were poets. You know, you're like, well, but can we just have rappers be rappers? Like, can that be a good thing? *(Chuckles.)* But I feel like in the last—maybe even just in the last 10 years, there's been such a blossoming of the intersection between those two kinds of music as jazz musicians, especially who grew up listening to hip-hop, become adult proficient jazz musicians and let that inform their music.

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When you put a rapper on a record like this, what's your responsibility as a musician? I mean, it's—you know, a rapper is writing their verses necessarily, right? So, how does that change what you're doing, when there's someone spitting bars on top?

Shabaka Hutchings: For me, they're musicians. Like, the decision to call them a rapper is a—it's a culturally specific, you know, designation. If you just see them as musicians who use words, and you're not necessarily listening—obviously, there is a dimension where I listen to the narrative and the lyric, but there is a greater dimension where I'm listening to the accent, the accentuations in their rhythm, and seeing how that reacts to the band.

And I think that's what—you know, that's the element that I'm more interested in. And that's the element that I think, as a group, we try to really sink into how we can play off the accents in the rhythm. Like, when you hear a rapper, it's like *(rhythmically)* ba-da-dadadada, ba-da-dada, da-da-da, da-dadada-da-da-dada. You know, it's not notes, as with a saxophone. But if the notes aren't the focal point, if the rhythm is the focal point within a time space, then it's so much information to just bounce off and be fed by. It just changes your whole way of responding. You know?

Jesse Thorn: Yeah, I mean, I feel like the element that people who don't listen to a lot of hip-hop lose from the performance of an MC is almost always flow. Like, to a certain extent, people who aren't really fluent in listening to hip-hop might lose words or lose lyrics. Like, you hear sometimes, "I can't tell what they're saying", right? But in general, I feel like the piece that goes missing when people—especially, when people intellectualize hip-hop—is that sort of style element that is the most important part of a rapper, right? *(Chuckles.)* Like, like "The Ten Crack Commandments", like Biggie's lyrics, if you look at them on a page—I mean, there's cool stuff in there, but pretty unremarkable. But the thing that is amazing about Biggie is his style, right? His voice and the way he uses his voice.

Shabaka Hutchings: Yeah. The approach. The approach to rhythm, like how you're actually using your voice as a drum within a given pentameter. You know, that is the important thing. And people have been saying it, you know. Like, "Oh, look at his flow." And that's the—that's where your thoughts should be orientated. But this is the whole thing with the clash of cultures is that it's a clash of priorities. Like, what the priority is. If you're looking at that music and actually you're not aware of the subtlety in flow, all you hear is the grid, all you hear are words in relation to a grid and nothing else, then you won't get it. It'll be invisible. But as soon as you actually perceive, you know, the existence of a world of flow and a world of inflection, then it becomes a completely different art form.

Jesse Thorn: So, Sons of Kemet is a relatively small group with two drummers. You know, James Brown famously toured with two drummers. I think that was primarily so that he could fire one at any time without having to fly a new guy in.

(They chuckle.)

What is your goal in having this relatively small group that has two drummers?

Shabaka Hutchings: Communication. You know, I find whenever we get a second drummer, it releases the drums from being a timekeeping instrument. You know, it means that they can actually have a dialogue. And it's that communication that means that actually we, as instrumentalists, then have another force to communicate with. And obviously, if there's one drummer, there'll be communication happening. But there's just another level of communication when you get two drummers together. Unless the two drummers have been given specific parts, and they're locked into a kind of a set groove. I like to tell them just not to do that as much as possible, you know. And there was even a period when I was telling them if they could pretend that they're percussionists and just think about what they're doing on isolated bits of the kit, as opposed to playing the drum set. That would be better.

Jesse Thorn: We'll have even more with Shabaka Hutchings after a quick break. Still to come, we'll talk about the Sons of Kemet song that he dedicated to his great grandmother. It's *Bullseye*, from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

Promo:

> **Music:** Plucky, percussion-focused synth.

Speaker: Thanks to everyone who contributed during this year's MaxFunDrive, we truly couldn't do what we do without you. With the drive in the rearview, it's time for another proud tradition: our annual charity pin sale! This year, the proceeds for the pin sale will support VoteRiders, a nonprofit dedicated to expanding ballot access nationwide.

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Members at $10 a month or more can purchase MaxFunDrive pins featuring shows from across the network, and all members are able to buy our network pin design, exclusive to this charity sale. The sale is live now, and it ends Friday, April 12th. For more info, head to MaximumFun.org/pinsale. And thanks again for your support!

(Music fades out.)

Transition: Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

Jesse Thorn: It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. I'm talking with Shabaka Hutchings. He's a jazz musician and composer. He has a new album coming out under his own name. It's called *Perceive Its Beauty, Acknowledge Its Grace*.

Let's hear another Sons of Kemet track. Maybe something from their 2018 album, *Your Queen is a Reptile*. There's a song—so, each of the tracks on this record is named after a sort of great woman from the African diaspora, from the history of the African diaspora. This track, "My Queen is Ada Eastman", is named after your grandmother, right?

Shabaka Hutchings: My great grandmother.

Jesse Thorn: Great grandmother. Tell me what you knew about her.

Shabaka Hutchings: Well, when we first moved to Barbados we stayed at her house for a couple of months, as we got settled. And you know, she was alive for the whole time that I was in Barbados. So, she lived 'til she was 103. And I just knew her as, you know, an incredibly lucid and hardworking, you know, woman. One of my earliest memories of her is her on top of the roof, you know, fixing the house with a hammer. And that must've been when she was like—I don't know, like late 80s.

She was always just walking around the neighborhood. Everyone knew her. She used to walk around, you know, get lost, and then people would just kind of guide her back to her house. And she was really a matriarch. She, you know—she owned three houses just from working and working and working. I think she kind of—when she retired, she then moved to America, and then worked for 20 years, then came back to Barbados and, you know, kind of kept doing odd jobs. So, yeah, it was really—I just knew her as someone that was really serious about providing for the whole family.

Jesse Thorn: Let's hear Sons of Kemet and "My Queen is Ada Eastman".

Music: “My Queen is Ada Eastman” from the album *Your Queen is a Reptile* by Sons of Kemet—a winding, brassy melody with strong percussion.

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: So, I've heard you describe Sons of Kemet, relative to your other records, as being relatively Caribbean. What does that mean for you?

Shabaka Hutchings: It means that when I'm sitting down to compose just the foundational music, the music that forms initial impetus, I'm thinking about my memory of the Caribbean and allowing that memory to inform the underpinning of the music. Now, when the band takes it and then interprets it in their ways, then it drifts off into something else. But at least for the very foundation of the music, a lot of it—especially in the early albums—was formed from my recollections of the Caribbean. And that might be something as simple as the bass line or the very initial clave that I asked the drummers to play or the—you know, the melody line. I like the idea of mystery in music. So, I don't like things to be clear cut. So, me saying that the band has a Caribbean underpinning in terms of the compositional structure doesn't mean that you're necessarily going to hear it directly. But there's going to be something in there that you can actually unpick and link back to the Caribbean if you know where to look.

Jesse Thorn: I find the music kind of mesmeric, you know—sort of like what they call spiritual jazz. Like, it’s an experience that kind of grabs your head and drags it along. Do you have an idea of what experience you want the audience to have when you're making music?

Shabaka Hutchings: Not when I'm making it. I don't really think about the music—or about the audience when I'm making it. Well, when I'm making it—do you mean when I'm writing it, or when I'm making it as in recording it or performing it?

Jesse Thorn: Either way.

Shabaka Hutchings: Well, when I'm playing live, I'd really like the audience to be engrossed in our world. Because that's what I like to happen when I go to concerts. I think the performer isn't necessarily doing their job if you're able to switch off and then think about something else.

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You know, I like to feel like the performer's grabbed me and is engaging me fully. And that can only happen when I know that the performer is engaged with the music fully. So, I'm trying to actually just really be as deep and committed to the musical experience from my side. And then I think that if the audience is tuned into that level of commitment, then they'll be sucked in also. And then the band will be sucked in, and then all of us will communally be in this—like a musical vortex. And then we can start having fun, you know.

Jesse Thorn: You have several bands. Another one of them is called Shabaka and the Ancestors. This is with a group of South African musicians. Did you meet them in South Africa?

Shabaka Hutchings: Yeah, there was a period when I was going backwards and forwards to South Africa maybe a couple of times a year, spending a couple of months each time. Because I was seeing a lady in South Africa. So, it was kind of a long-distance relationship going backwards and forwards.

Jesse Thorn: A distinctly long-distance relationship! *(Chuckles.)*

Shabaka Hutchings: Oh yeah, it was so long. *(Chuckles.)* It was a very long-distance relationship. Yeah. And I just had a lot of really amazing experiences with musicians when I was there. And I remember I would come back to Britain and just be telling everyone, "You have no idea how much fun I'm having in Johannesburg or Cape Town. Like, there's some really amazing musicians."

And people are like, "Oh yeah, yeah, cool. Yeah. You know, I'm sure they can play."

And I was thinking that, no, you really don't understand. Like, these guys are like amazing. Like, the experiences I'm having are like phenomenal. But they're like, "Yeah, yeah, yeah."

So, at some point I was like I really need to just document what's happening, because I'm going over there and actually getting so inspired and blown away by the creativity and just the vibe and the energy that was out there musically. So, I kind of put together some of just my favorite musicians to play with that I'd played with in various different formations and made that first album.

Jesse Thorn: This is *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. I'm talking with jazz musician Shabaka Hutchings. He has a new solo record coming out later this month, *Perceive Its Beauty. Acknowledge Its Grace*.

So, you've been—I presume—like many of us, mostly isolated for a year and a bit.

(He confirms.)

Your music is so—like, feels so communal to me. *(Chuckles.)* Like, you know, there's plenty of singer-songwriters and rapper-producers who I'm sure are just holed up in the studio knocking out songs and feeling great. You know what I mean? But I have a hard time imagining your music existing without collaborations with other people—direct collaboration with other people. So, how have you managed to find that, you know, inside your apartment?

Shabaka Hutchings: It's been real ups and downs this pandemic, this last year, in that it's—for me, it's about searching for what makes me feel happy, you know? And that sounds simple. But it's like real simple, and it's also really complex. Because obviously, you know, we're not playing with people, and I don't like the idea of playing with people over the internet. So, I really got down to what does it mean to play for myself? You know, like what does it mean to find the joy of making music without an audience? And actually without an audience, there's a lot less intensity. You know? There's a lot less of that kind of trajectory where the music rises and rises and rises to climax. There's a stillness.

So, first of all, it became about not necessarily playing the clarinet or the saxophone as much. Which was a shocker to kind of realize that I didn't want to play these instruments. I started to practice the—you know, the shakuhachi and the plastic shakuhachi more. A lot of little flutes that I've gotten over the years, just playing them for my own pleasure. Then it meant that when I went back to the saxophone and the clarinets, I was actually kind of finding new things to play. And yeah. It's like the more I become comfortable with, you know, playing for myself, then I think the more power I'm gaining so that when I actually play and communicate with other people, I've got a more solid underpinning of actually what I have to say. But also I've spent a lot of time just learning new technology. So, you know, I've been learning the MPC.

You know, I've been through a big kind of pathway. Like, up until this pandemic time, I was the guy that just played the instruments. Like, I didn't own a microphone. I didn't really use Logic. I kind of knew how to use Logic in terms of just cutting up files and sending them to people if I needed to, but I wasn't really adept to any music production technology. And I'd always known that I should have, but I could just be practicing my horn. So, I just never got around to it.

Jesse Thorn: I like this new MPC Shabaka Hutchings. MPC is a digital sampler, a beat machine. It really evidences the maxim that I just invented—

[00:35:00]

—that all things bend towards J Dilla, eventually. *(Laughs.)*

Shabaka Hutchings: Oh yeah. And yeah, just the story of him just making that last album on his hospital bed—you know, it's always stuck with me. It's like what is this machine? And for me, this is a thing that I've thought of for so long. Like, how do you humanize the machine? You know, how do you get an Android approach, where you have the tech—like, we are within the technological realm. But how do you get a machine that can actually be fit for purpose for human—you know, like human qualities? And I feel like J Dilla is someone who could do that. He kind of took the pentameter, and he twisted it and worked around it.

So, yeah, it's like I've done so much of the human element in terms of making music, I feel like now I'm in a good space where I can actually start, you know, looking into the machine *(chuckles)* and seeing like where my role can be. ‘Cause I don't just want to make beats. You know, I'm not a beat maker, but I think there's something that I've got to offer that realm. You know? But I just need to learn it first before it can come out.

Jesse Thorn: Well, I'm looking forward to it, Shabaka. And congratulations on *Black to the Future*. It's a really spectacular record, and I love your work. So, thank you for coming on *Bullseye*. It's nice to get to talk to you.

Shabaka Hutchings: Thank you. Thank you, pleased to be here.

Music: “Throughout the Madness, Stay Strong” from the album *Black to the Future* by Sons of Kemet.

(Music plays under the dialogue.)

Jesse Thorn: Shabaka Hutchings from 2021. Let's go out with one more song from *Black to the Future*, the album by his band Sons of Kemet. This one is called “Throughout the Madness, Stay Strong”.

Music: “Throughout the Madness, Stay Strong” by Sons of Kemet—a song with fast-paced, high-energy percussion juxtaposed by lilting sax that slowly builds in intensity.

(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. At my house, I've been trying to turn my shed into an office where I can watch stuff for this show. And well, yesterday I called the AV supply company, and it turns out they don't sell any mounts that are strong enough to hold my projector. *(Chuckling.)* So, I gotta build some weird brackets.

Anyway, our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producers, Jesus Ambrosio and Richard Robey. Our production fellow at Maximum Fun 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, our thanks to The Go! Team, our thanks to their label Memphis Industries, *Bullseye* is on Instagram @BullseyeWithJesseThorn. You can also find us on Twitter, on YouTube, and on Facebook.

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 and is distributed by NPR.

(Music fades out.)