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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 next guest is Bilal. He's a vocalist who straddles two worlds. You could call him a rap fan's favorite jazz singer. He's appeared on tracks by Clipse, Mac Miller, Common, and Kendrick Lamar. You could also call him a jazz fan's favorite hip hop singer. His own work with a band is definitely jazz, but it's also soul, and channels a bit of the innovative hip-hop sounds of the producer J Dilla.

**Music:** “West Side Girl” from the album *A Love Surreal* by Bilal.

*Hey, how you doing?*

*I've been watching you getting down*

(*Music fades out.*)

**Jesse Thorn:** Bilal has been a guest on *Bullseye* before, almost a decade and a half ago now. Earlier this summer, he released *Live at the Glasshaus*. It's a live album with an accompanying concert film. That description kind of sells the project short. Bilal performed for one night only in front of 100 people with a capital B Band. Robert Glasper, Burniss Travis, Questlove, and Common. Together they performed a retrospective of music from Bilal's 23 years in the business. I could talk to you more about it, or you could just listen to what I'm talking about. This is “Something to Hold On To”

**Music:** “Something to Hold Onto” from the album *Love for Sale* by Bilal.

*Something to hold onto*

*Something to hold onto*

*Is there anything I can do for you, darling?*

*Just wanna get you next to me*

(*Music fades out.*)

**Jesse Thorn:** Bilal, Welcome back to *Bullseye*. It's nice to see you again. I looked it up—14 years later. I'm glad you're still making wonderful music. I'm glad you come back on the show.

**Bilal:** Oh, thanks for having me back.

**Jesse Thorn:** You know, like I'm calling out 14 years like that's a long time. Robert Glasper, who helped spearhead this project and plays keyboards and piano on it, you and he go even further back than that. Where did the two of you meet?

**Bilal:** We met in college. So, that would be like freshman year college. We met, I want to say, like '90... I guess August '97. When does college start? September?

**Jesse Thorn:** Yeah, something like that.

**Bilal:** '97? (*Laughs.*)

**Jesse Thorn:** Bilal, don't worry, you don't have to get the month right. This is not a test. (*Laughs.*)

**Bilal:** '98, maybe '98. Right. I don't know why I'm trying to be specific with numbers, because I don't know anybody's birthday.

**Jesse Thorn:** I mean, I would think that when you get to music school and you're a singer, the first thing you're excited to meet is a really good piano player.

**Bilal:** Absolutely. Me and Rob, it's a funny story how we met. Because we both went to a jazz conservatory school in Manhattan. And it was like a new type of school. It was a jazz side of this other classical school, Mannes Conservatory. So, there was only like a few students they brought in. And we all had to try out vigorously to get in this school, right, back then. Because they only had like—I think like 200 students. Now, it's like 3,000/2,000 students there. But then, it was a small school.

And the first day of school, they had all of the musicians come to the auditorium. And all of the teachers were working jazz musicians. So, they come to the mic, the dean, and says—and he's just calling out random students to come up. And he's making bands, just calling off names. He's like, "Piano player." It was almost like a jam session. You know how you go to a jazz jam session, he's like, "Oh, we're going to have a—we need a piano player. We're going to have a bass player." Long story short, they called me and Rob up to play in the band. And that's how we met, (*chuckling*) just because they called us up to play together.

And he would call off a tune, and we played it for the other students, I guess, in front of the auditorium. And that's how I met Rob.

**Jesse Thorn:** What did you think of his playing?

**Bilal:** Oh my god, Rob—everybody, you know, it was (*cheering*) “Who!” right away. (*Laughs.*) Rob's always been a bad cat, you know.

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In our world, that's what we call him. A cat that just has that natural ability, that just natural feel and just awesome playing ability. You say, “Oh, that's a bad cat,” you know. I was like, oh—right away, I was like, “Oh, he's one of the illest cats.”

And it's funny, because as a singer in a jazz world, musicians hate them, you know.

(*Jesse chuckles.*)

So, I'm sure Rob (*laughing*) was expecting the dean to call up some type of saxophone player or a damn trumpet player. And he called up a singer. But I immediately noticed that he knew how to play with a singer, you know? He didn't immediately just try to play over top of me to prove something, you know, to the rest of the cats in the school that he was like one of the illest cats there. He was very mature right off, you know. And you could tell he was about the music.

**Jesse Thorn:** He also has a pretty incredible feel for playing different kinds of music. Like, he can really handle the virtuosity of playing jazz, but he also has a really good—he can really play to a beat, you know. Like, he can play that kind of hip-hop inflection that is often a struggle for people who mostly play jazz music.

**Bilal:** Mm-hm. Well, it's kind of—I guess I saw it like—the same way I get it and understand it was we grew up hearing all of that at the same time. You know what I'm saying? We both grew up in church, playing. But we also grew up in the environment of hip-hop and playing along and playing that type of music as well as the jazz in the school setting around other kids that was going through that same experience. You know. So, our musical experiences—they're very similar, you know, because we both went to a performing arts high school as well. So, I relate.

**Jesse Thorn:** Did you think you were going to grow up to sing in church or sing pop music or sing jazz?

**Bilal:** Mm. When I was coming up, I wanted to sing jazz first. I grew up singing in the church as a kid, but once I was affected by the jazz bug, that's what I wanted to do.

**Jesse Thorn:** When did that happen?

**Bilal:** In high school. Well—it was like as young as like maybe nine or ten. Because my dad's best friend, Mr. Ben, he owned a lot of the jazz clubs in the city. And so, my dad would take me there as a kid when he found out I was into music. He would take me there, and they would let me sit in the coat room. Just in case, you know, somebody came in and saw that I wasn't supposed to be there. I was just listening to the music, anyway.

But I would just sit in the chair, and I just liked—in my head, that was the first time it dawned on me that, wow, you could have a job singing! (*Laughs.*) Like, dang! These cats just show up at night, do these two sets, and go home? And get paid? Like, you know. And I would see Mr. Ben, you know, you know, getting their money after the gig. I was like, “That’s cool!” And they dress nice! I was like, “I want to do that!” You know, so I guess that was the first time I was like, “Oh man, I wanna be a jazz cat.” (*Laughs.*)

**Jesse Thorn:** Was there somebody—was there a show that you remember in particular?

**Bilal:** Mm. I don't remember a show in particular. But I just remember the vibe, you know. Just the vibe of the room, ‘cause that place used to be packed. It used to be called the Zanzibar Blue. And they used to have a club downstairs and upstairs. So, it was two different jazz shows going on at one. And everybody used to play there, like the Marsalis Brothers to whoever was ill at that time. That was one of their Philly spots that you stopped through, you know, when you waited in New York, I guess. You know, if you were gigging, you’re touring. So, a lot of serious cats played through there. And so, my dad always says—

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“Oh man, I took you there because I thought it would inspire you to want to open up your own jazz club. (*Laughing.*) And then you came out wanting to be one of the cats.”

**Jesse Thorn:** Your dad took you there so you could become a businessman? That's why your dad took his kid to the jazz club? (*Chuckles.*)

**Bilal:** He’s like, “I thought you’d have thought it was cool to see how it was ran, you know?” Because my dad, he had like a deli or like a kind of bodega. And they had a sandwich thing in the back and stuff like that. But he would take me there just to see like, you know, I guess other levels of business or whatever. Owning stuff. I don't know. (*Laughs.*)

**Jesse Thorn:** We're going to take a quick break when we return more with Bilal. It's *Bullseye* from [MaximumFun.org](https://www.maximumfun.org) and NPR.

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

**Jesse Thorn:** Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. I'm talking with Bilal. He's a Grammy award-winning singer and songwriter. He's performed alongside Kendrick Lamar, Beyoncé, Erykah Badu, Jay-Z, Dr. Dre, and many, many more. His newest album is called *Live at the Glasshaus*. It's a recording from a one-night performance alongside Questlove, Common, Robert Glasper, and Burniss Travis. Let's get back into our conversation.

Your new record has a really wonderful band, Questlove and Robert Glasper and Burniss Travis. And I wanted to play a little bit from it, because we heard first something that was a little bit more straight R&B, and this is something that is a little bit harder onto the jazz side, or at least a little wilder. Let's hear a little bit of “All Matter” from my guest, Bilal.

**Music:** “All Matter” from the album *Airtight’s Revenge* by Bilal, a frenetic, upbeat jazz number with cascading piano.

*(Music fades out.)*

**Jesse Thorn:** Robert Glasper there kind of sounding almost like Bach or Philip Glass or something like that. It's really wild.

**Bilal:** Hell yeah. Yeah, it's crazy how the music can pull different things out when you have that facility. It's like it's pulling—like, you know, Bruce Lee saying, *(impersonating Bruce Lee)* “It hits back! It hits all by itself!” Like, Rob's on that—the whole band, they're on that level. Like, a lot of this is just Burniss—*(sighs)* it's almost like you don't even know what you—the OG.

Like, I look at Quest like the first of that just blending all of those styles and being able to play and have the feel in all of those different, you know, genres, I guess. Like, he's a master of feel. So, wow, it was crazy to even have that band. It's like a... like a farfetched idea. I was just like, eh—we were talking to Jarrett and my manager, Nicole. And he's done the Glasshaus thing with a few other cool artists in New York, and it's been like a cool thing. And when he asked me, “Oh, so you know, what are you going to do?”

I was just like, “Oh, we're going to do something cool, man. I'm getting Robert Glasper. I'm getting Questlove!” *(Chuckles.)*

And I just called them up, and they were like, “Actually, we're in town! Yeah, we'll jam. Let's jam! Let's go.” And then Common was there. So, it just—it was like—it turned into really kind of how... I feel like we all met, you know, in that free environment. Because Quest used to do the Black Lily thing a long time ago. He had this whole thing, and that's how OKPlayer kind of started.

**Jesse Thorn:** And Black Lily was a regular show that he had in Philadelphia.

**Bilal:** Yeah, it was a regular like jam session for musicians in Philadelphia who were into that genre-bending type of experience. Like, a trumpet player here in Philadelphia, Jafar Barron, used to run a lot of these bands. And he would hire a mixture of different type of musicians, and make them all play in his band.

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Like, that was the first time I would hear something of that type of sort. And they would all be playing in the bands that was playing at the Black Lily. So, it's crazy. Yeah.

**Jesse Thorn:** And that show was famous for helping to launch the careers of Jill Scott and Jazzyfatnastees and lots of folks.

*(Bilal confirms.)*

When you got signed, you were still in school, right?

**Bilal:** Yep, I was in school.

**Jesse Thorn:** It was it was sort of the crest of neo-soul. And there was soul music on the radio, both great and just slightly corny music where they put an organ and a particular snare sound into it to make it into a neo-soul record to kind of hit the trend.

I imagine that when you were working on that album, it must have been hard to try and figure out what kind of record you were making. Because there was this particular kind of song that could make it onto the radio, but then you also were making some pretty crazy stuff and also, you know, you ended up going off and cutting a few songs with Dr. Dre. You know what I mean?

*(Bilal confirms.)*

So, what was it like for you as a 21-year-old who thought he was going to be a jazz singer to all of a sudden be making a major label record, trying to get songs on the radio and trying to figure out what your recording identity was?

**Bilal:** Mm. Well, the way I started my demo was with a drummer, Aaron Comess, who plays with this progressive band, The Spin Doctors. So, the original demo we were doing, we wound up doing it because he was going to our school. And we didn't know he was rich, but we had a—

*(They laugh.)*

Uh, Rob—

**Jesse Thorn:** You didn't know the man had a pocket full of kryptonite.

**Bilal:** No, no. No, 'cause he dressed so unassuming and just—*(giggles.)* And we had this gig we was playing, it started at like two o'clock in the morning or something like that. Me, Rob, and Arnie Lawrence, who was one of the jazz musicians that started our school. So, he would hire different musicians that he thought were like ready to start working to random gigs. And we was just playing for tips, but it was like, "Ooh, we got a gig! Oh my god! In New York!" You know?

And Comess was on the gig, and so we started falling asleep, and I started falling asleep not even making the damn gig, 'cause it started at two o'clock in the morning. But he started saying, "Well, let's just hang out at my house, so we could stay up for the gig." And we come to his house, his whole basement is a freaking laid out studio! So, I started from then on writing tunes. And it came into my head like, man, what type of music do I want to do? And I was like, man, I don't want to play for old heads. Like, I want to do music that could be played at the Lily or—you know.

I never looked at it like neo-soul. I looked at it as an environment where we could play like a progressive (*cancel beep*) over some jazz, or some jazz (*cancel beep*) over top, using hip-hop as that avenue to kind of do it. You know what I mean?

**Jesse Thorn:** I remember when I first heard your music, it was before—I hope you'll forgive me 25 years later for having downloaded some of it illegally, but it was before your first record came out. And it was like an EP set. I don't know if it was your demo or—but it was five or six songs. And some of the songs that were on that ended up on the album pretty much as is, and some of them were pretty straight in the sort of jazz/neo-soul/R&B lane.

And there's a song on there called “Second Child” where you go absolutely wild.

*(Bilal laughs.)*

**Music:** “Second Child” from the album *1<sup>st</sup> Born Second* by Bilal.

*(Yo, yo, yo)*

*Where you at?*

*Tryna find my, tryna find my nation*

*I gotta, I gotta, I gotta, yeah*

*Da-da-da, da-da-da*

*Da-da-da, da-da-da*

*Da-da-da, da-da-da*

*Da-da-da, da-da-da*

*Da-da-da, da-da-da*

*Da-da-da, da-da-da*

*Da-da-da, da-da-da (Second child, second child)*

*Da-da-da, da-da-da (Second child)*

*(Music fades out.)*

**Jesse Thorn:** I remember getting to that.

[00:20:00]

It was, you know, the fifth or sixth song out of five or six and being like, oh, this is serious!

*(They laugh.)*

Like, this dude is going all in. No half measures here.

**Bilal:** Oh yeah. No, no, for sure. *(Laughs.)* I was in a lot of—I was *(censor beep)* though, to be able to do that. Like I said, like into kind of trying to fuse all the *(censor beep)* that I was learning in jazz school into what I wanted to do. It was like I don't want to play my music for an older audience. You know what I'm saying? I want to play for—or spark off, another wave of this *(censor beep)* where there's people my age out there into it. So, I was always trying to find ways to get it in there.

And it's funny, *(laughs)* “Second Child” was the concept I learned from Reggie Workman, where he would just come up with an analogy or in a story like, “You know, imagine you're walking out the house, and then you trip, and you fall on the street, and there's a bus coming! And then you got to like kind of fall out of the way of the bus and—so, you don't get hit. Okay, let's play that song. One, two, three!”

*(They laugh.)*

And everybody's like, “What?!” So. *(Laughs.)* It was like, through there you learn about Sun Ra and all of those cats. So.

**Jesse Thorn:** I don't often interview an R&B singer, and I'm, you know, reading an old interview, and they say, “Oh, who's your influences?” and they're like, “Oh, Frank Zappa.”

**Bilal:** Hell yeah! *(Laughs.)*

**Jesse Thorn:** And I hear it.

**Bilal:** Hell yeah. I love Frank Zappa.

**Jesse Thorn:** It must have been wild going in and recording with those—because I mean, besides going in and recording some great songs with Dr. Dre, which I think we talked about 14 years ago when you were on the show last time. You know, you recorded, the hook and some more on a Clipse song that was produced by the Neptunes.

Like, these are the biggest, heaviest weights in all of hip-hop. And they wanted some quality that you had, you know. It was more than just being able to carry a tune or, you know, somebody putting somebody on the hook of a song because they want to go on a date with them. You know what I mean?



**Bilal:** Mm-hm. Well, I don't know. A lot of them just wanted that authentic like just funk, you know, and just understanding of translating that funk or that old sound but into the hip-hop thing. Because they—a lot of cats would gravitate to me, because they were into old records. And they would say, “You sing like an old school soul singer, you know. So, it's like very authentic the way you're doing it.” So.

**Jesse Thorn:** Let's hear a little bit of that Clipse song that my guest, Bilal, is on from their second record, produced by the Neptunes.

**Music:** “Nightmares” from the album *Hell Hath No Fury* by Clipse.

*... these voices ain't my friend*

*They're haunting me*

*Those, those memories*

*I'm having nightmares, ooh*

*Say I'm P-noid*

*They say I'm P-noid*

*I'm having nightmares...*

*(Music fades out.)*

**Jesse Thorn:** The other day, I was on YouTube, and the YouTube algorithm has me kind of locked down. It knows that at any given time, I just want to click on the video for “Luchini, This Is It” by Camp Lo, or “Don't Let It Go To Your Head” by BrandNubian. But it also correctly predicted that I would enjoy this performance by you singing Curtis Mayfield songs. And this is—the band that you are playing with is called the—my German pronunciation, not strong, Bilal, Westdeutscher Rundfunk Big Band.

Which apparently is like—I like looked it up—is some sort of like long-standing radio orchestra in Cologne, Germany, that is dedicated to playing pop and dance music. So, it's like this video is you and Ledisi in front of, you know, 70 musicians or something. *(Laughs.)* Including guitars and stuff, but also just like a full orchestra. Like, a true big band. It's this tribute to Curtis Mayfield, and I just wanted to play a little bit of it.

**Music:** “Move On” by Curtis Mayfield performed live by Bilal and Westdeutscher Rundfunk Big Band.

*Just move on up*

*Towards your destination*

*Though you may find, from time to time*

*Complication*

*Oh!*

*Keep on*

*Bite your lip*

*And take a trip*

[00:25:00]

**Jesse Thorn:** What an amazing and bizarre situation to be in. (*Chuckles.*)

**Bilal:** Yeah. No, actually they smashed that. And Curtis Mayfield is one of my like favorites. So, I'm sitting here trying to... I feel really bad, because I'm trying to remember the name of the arranger. Because he was the person that got me to do the gig, because I wasn't going to do it. But he worked with Prince, and he did a lot of Prince's later string arrangements. So—Vince. That's it. Vince Mendoza. Incredible arranger.

I first performed with him with Robert at the—I think it was the North Sea Jazz Festival. And they were doing some Black radio stuff. And the way he arranged “All Matter”? I was like, oh my god, this dude is incredible! So, when he called, you know... he was trying to get us to do it in America, but he didn't like the funding or whatever he was getting, I guess.

And so, he said, “I found a killing band in Germany.” (*Laughs.*) And he had a lot of the musicians—he brought a lot of the musicians, at least the rhythm section, he brought with him. And so, I guess that marriage of the musicians he brought with him, and then the orchestra, it just—man, it was dope.

**Jesse Thorn:** You know, I wonder like—as you have entered your deep adulthood—what you have to do to maintain the falsetto that is such a huge part of your singing. Is it just always there for you?

**Bilal:** Hm. Yeah, I don't know. It's not something I—I actually don't live the life of a singer. (*Cackles.*) Like, you know. I did have—actually, I don't know. I think a lot of the ways that I go into the falsetto, I'm screaming anyway. So, I don't know, I guess it's just—I'm being preserved for a cause. (*Laughs.*)

**Jesse Thorn:** Are you scared one day you're just going to tear it up, and you're going to go there one day, and it's not going to be there?

**Bilal:** No, it'll be there in like a different kind of way, like probably some James Brown or something. I'll find a way—a use for it. (*Cackles.*) Whichever way it turns. I'll have to sing lower at that point.

**Jesse Thorn:** I want to play a song you made with Kendrick Lamar. You worked on his record, *To Pimp a Butterfly*. He cut a song on your record as well. I think I might play the one from his, just because I think there are so few artists who have so successfully synthesized contemporary jazz and hip-hop. Like, just without any compromise. So, let's listen to a little bit of Kendrick Lamar's "These Walls" from *To Pimp a Butterfly*.

**Music:** "These Walls" from the album *To Pimp a Butterfly* by Kendrick Lamar.

*If these walls could talk*

*I can feel your reign when it cries*

*God lives inside of you*

*If these walls could talk*

*I love it when I'm in it*

*I love it when I'm in it, oh*

*(Ah, ah, ah, ah, ah)*

*If these walls could talk, they'd tell me to go deep*

*Yelling at me continuously, I can see*

*Your defense mechanism is my decision*

*Knock these walls down, that's my...*

*(Music fades out.)*

**Jesse Thorn:** I think sometimes—probably when you get hip-hop gigs—it's a matter of "Come by the studio or go to your studio and lay down this hook. We like the texture of your voice. We know you can do it. You'll do a good job." I would imagine sometimes it is more than that. What's a time that you worked on a hip-hop record where it was more than just you coming in and singing a little bit?

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Because they know how your voice sounds, and that's the sound they want?

**Bilal:** Hm. Probably—well, all of them is kind of like—I've been fortunately—most of them I would say—to have them all be created organically, you know, in some type of a way. You know, with Kendrick, I was out there with him. It wasn't like something that he sent to me, you know. We were all in the room together.

And—but I would say Dilla, because I—from the very scratch of it, of something—you know, I got to watch him do. And—it was like a jazzmataz record. Well, every time I worked with him, it was just really cool. Because it was like a performance. He wasn't the type of person that would come to the studio with stuff that was already made, but he could make the whole thing in like 10 minutes! So, it was like a magic trick. (*Laughs.*)

So, I would say working with him, it was cool. Because he moved in the speed like a jazz musician would. So, I learned a lot, and I felt like I came out knowing more from working with him in the studio.

**Jesse Thorn:** I remember hearing those—at the time, JD was what he was going by—beats earlier on in his career and thinking like this sounds like the past and the future at the same time, in a way that blew my mind. I think you can still really hear—in a lot of contemporary jazz, you can hear the way that the sounds and drums in JD's or J Dilla's productions moved. Like, the way they were syncopated and the way that they sounded, like you just hear it (*snapping rhythmically*) right away in these new records. You know, you hear that feeling.

**Bilal:** Well, he's got that Detroit soulfulness about him, you know. And it's just in his music. I don't know. I don't know. His choice in everything. And he was—all of that stuff was just freehand, because he didn't even use anything quantized. So, he just had like a just internal kind of like—it was just soulful. (*Laughs.*)

**Jesse Thorn:** I think there's like an element of funk to it too, in the sense that like, you know, if you ask George Clinton, “What's the funk?”—right?—he'd talk about the one. But it's about that feeling of holding you back, holding you back, holding you back, and then letting it go. And that's in like every drum sound on those JD records. There's always that feeling of like (*makes a heavy beat noise*), even when they're fast and stuttering or there's a lot. You know, even when it's not slow, it's just that feeling of being held back and then released.

**Bilal:** Yeah, yeah. No, it's like a heartbeat. It's an internal like groove that he had, you know. Or like you would say a drummer has a feel. He had a feel like he was a '70s drummer, but he was on a damn MP.

(*They laugh.*)

**Jesse Thorn:** The beat machine. The sample—the replaying samples on pads.

**Bilal:** But he could replay all of that (*cursor beep*) just like that. I remember when we were working on my last album I was doing for Interscope, *Love for Sale*. And this was like when he was falling a little bit ill. But I got to see just the level of genius he was on. 'Cause I

thought that he was just MP, you know. And we were doing this stuff, and we got a call that we couldn't use no samples no more.

And this cat said, "Okay, cool, I'll just replay everything." He had all the old keyboards. He programmed them all to sound exactly like the damn samples and replayed exactly what he sampled! And the fill, everything was just like that. And we was already—we were already panicking trying to get James Poyser to Detroit to replay!

And James came out there and was like, "Who played this?"

And we was like, "Dilla!" We were just laughing at him like, "Yo, he's the onion." (*Laughs.*)

[00:35:00]

Like, you know, you just had that type of a feel on the MP. But he was like low-key like just Prince. He was like Stevie Wonder. Like, I've seen pictures of him on upright bass. (*Laughing.*) I'm like what is he doing?! Like, what is going on with this cat? But he could play all of that (*sensor beep*). He was so into music. So, like I said, playing with him or doing music with him, I always knew I was going to see something or learn something different.

**Jesse Thorn:** We'll finish up with Bilal in just a minute. Stay with us. It's *Bullseye* from [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and NPR.

**Promo:**

**Music:** High energy rock.

**Biz Ellis:** This is Biz. And this is the final season of *One Bad Mother*, a comedy podcast about parenting. This is going to be a year of celebrating all that makes this podcast and this community magical.

**Speaker 1:** I'm so glad that I found your podcast.

**Speaker 2:** I just cannot thank you enough for just being the voice of reason as I'm trying to figure all of this out.

**Speaker 3:** Thank you, and cheers to your incredible show and the vision you have to provide this space for all of us.

**Biz Ellis:** This is still a show about life after giving life. And yes, there will be swears. You can find us on [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org). And as always, you are doing a great job!

(*Music ends.*)

**Transition:** Chiming synth.

**Jesse Thorn:** I'm Jesse Thorn. You're listening to *Bullseye*. My guest is the singer Bilal.

Bilal, I want to ask you for a second about your family, because two of your kids have really serious health challenges. One developmental and one an illness. One of your kids is autistic. Is he still not verbal? He still doesn't speak?

**Bilal:** No, he's pretty much nonverbal. He has words. I guess Bobby's an onion, so he draws from things, and I didn't even know he had it. But yeah.

**Jesse Thorn:** What kind of communication do you have with him?

**Bilal:** We communicate through a combination of words, signs, and I guess gestures. He's very expressive of letting you know what he wants. He doesn't speak in like full sentences, but he has a lot of words, you know. It's almost like he's the boss, you know. Instead of saying, you know, "Let's go here," he'll just say, "Here." You know. *(Laughs.)* We call him the bully.

**Jesse Thorn:** I have three autistic kids, and when they were diagnosed and I started to learn about neurodivergence, one of the effects that it had on me was that I started thinking about my own brain and my own way of being in the world and how it wasn't neutral. It was distinct and its own thing. And I had my own sensitivities to the world and differences. Did you have that experience?

**Bilal:** Yes, absolutely. I've learned so much from my son about myself and about art and just about the world and life—just how he's approached it. He's like 22 now. He's 22 now. So, I've watched the different phases and have lived it through with him. And he's an incredible artist, like visual artist. And just seeing his process of how he does stuff, it taught me a lot about how to approach the music.

Because I used to be very I guess too serious about this stuff. And it would take me a long time to even create sometimes. But I learned build and destroy from him. *(Laughs.)* Like, he'll do amazing stuff and then just get up, ball it up, throw it in the trashcan. "This is just my life. I just do all sorts of *(censor beep)*. Like, I'm just like—" Right? To the point where we have to like redirect him so we can get the piece and take it and put it somewhere to save it.

Because he just does it for the sake of just the practice, you know? And I'm so inspired by him and just his approach a lot of the times, you know. And learning to be his parent has taught me a lot about everything, you know.

**Jesse Thorn:** One of your kids has sickle cell. How has that affected their life?

**Bilal:** Same deal. The thankful thing with Ramsey, my son, is he doesn't get a lot of crises.

[00:40:00]

Like, you know, painful situations. But we've dealt with a few scares, you know. So, I've come to be free with life and what it is offering me, you know. I've come a long way from the initial bitterness into where I've learned and come into a space of learning.

At first, I thought—you know, my main reason for life was to be a musician. And now I go weeks without even listening to music. You know? It's no longer my first love.

**Jesse Thorn:** Is there a song on the new record that we could go out on?

**Bilal:** From *The Glasshaus*? Oh, you spoke about Zappa. So, the song I wrote when I was in my real Zappa zone was “All For Love”. (*Chuckles.*) Because the way Zappa would change different patterns or different time signatures. But we were able to get—I just kept it in three, because I'm like, “This is an R&B record I'm playing.” (*Laughs.*) But we still kept the understanding the concepts. So, yeah, let's play that. We actually recorded that here in this actual—

**Jesse Thorn:** In the studio you're in, in Philadelphia?

**Bilal:** —in the studio that I'm at. So, yeah, that'd be dope. (*Chuckles.*)

**Jesse Thorn:** Alright. Let's hear that from Bilal's new album, *Live at Glasshaus*, which is also a video album that you can find right now.

Bilal, it's so nice to get to talk to you. I so have admired your music so much for so long. And it's a real pleasure.

**Bilal:** Thanks for having me back.

**Music:** “All For Love” from the album *Live from the Glasshaus* by Bilal.

*You think I'm a fool, but still*

*I did it all for us*

*You know I did it all for love*

*(Music continues under the dialogue.)*

**Jesse Thorn:** Bilal. His new album, *Live at the Glasshaus*, is wonderful. You can stream it just about anywhere or watch the concert on YouTube.

**Music:**

*... even the sun moves on*

All for what?

*(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, I'm going to be frank with you, it's too hot.

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. Our video producer is Daniel Speer. We get booking help from Mara Davis. Special thanks this week to the team at Milk Boys Studios in Philadelphia for recording our interview with Bilal. Our interstitial music is by DJW, also known as Dan Wally. I was going to go to the—I was going to try—I asked Dan to go to the ballgame with me this week. This guy's summering on the cape!

Our theme song is called “Huddle Formation”, written and recorded by The Go! Team. Thanks to them and to their label, Memphis Industries. *Bullseye* is on Instagram, [@BullseyeWithJesseThorn](#). We're also on Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook. Big stuff coming on the *Bullseye* YouTube page, so go subscribe now. I'm not playing around. Go search for *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn*, hit subscribe. Smash that subscribe button, as they say.

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.)*