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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 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. The 1995 Source Awards were held in New York City at the Paramount Theatre. They were the big awards in hip-hop. It was an intense scene. Tensions were simmering between the East Coast and the West Coast. Snoop Dogg won Best Solo Artist, the Wu-Tang Clan won Best Group, Best New Solo Artist went to the Notorious B.I.G., who beat out Warren G.

But when the Best New Group award was announced, it wasn't a New York act or one from LA. It was Outkast from Atlanta, Georgia. As they walked up to the podium, the boos were loud enough that you could hear them on the TV broadcast. The two of them stepped up to the microphone and Big Boi deferred to his partner, André.

Clip:

André 3000: But it's like this though. I'm tired of folks, you know what I'm saying? Them closed-minded folks. You know what I'm saying? It's like we got a demo tape, and don't nobody want to hear it. But it's like this, the South got something to say. That's all I got to say.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Jesse Thorn: It was a moment that changed hip-hop forever. It essentially moved the center of rap from Los Angeles and New York City to the ATL, where it's remained ever since. And it launched two high school friends into the hip-hop firmament. Outkast's second and third records, *ATLiens* and *Aquemini*, are among the greatest rap albums ever made. Big Boi and André proved that they could rap with anyone. And even more than that, they showed that they could meld the intensely personal with the universal idiom of hip-hop without ever for a moment losing their sense of joy.

Music: “Rosa Parks” from the album *The Videos (DVD)* by Outkast.

Ah-ha, hush that fuss

Everybody move to the back of the bus

Do you wanna bump and slump with us?

We the type of people make the club get drunk

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: Their next record, *Stankonia*, made them pop stars.

Music: “So Fresh, So Clean” from the album *Stankonia* by Outkast.

Ain't nobody dope as me; I'm just so fresh, so clean

So fresh and so clean, clean

Don't you think I'm so sexy? I'm just so fresh, so clean

So fresh and so clean, clean

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: And their last album, *Speakerboxxx/The Love Below*, made them legends.

When he was getting ready to make that record, André picked up a guitar and had somebody teach him a few chords. Those chords—and I mean those chords, literally the first chords he ever learned—turned into maybe the biggest and best pop hit of the last 25 years.

Music: “Hey Ya!” from the album *Speakerboxxx/The Love Below* by Outkast.

Hey ya! Hey ya!

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: The success of that track was so monumental that it seemed to dwarf all of Outkast's past work. And it led people to ask: what was Outkast now? André and Big Boi were still among the greatest rappers who'd ever lived. They were at the absolute top of pop music. And even having recorded what were basically two solo albums packaged together, they were still unquestionably and forever a team.

Years earlier, Big Boi had rapped that the two of them were “sticking together like flour and water to make that slow dough,” but what did that mean if the world was singing along with André while André played guitar? And what did it mean if André just wasn't up to it anymore? Because by the end, it sure seemed like he was straight-up worn out.

Of course, that was now 20 years ago. So, we know where things went. Big Boi has recorded a bunch of solo records, mostly ranging from good to great. And André? Well, he's done

some acting. He made a cartoon show. He won a very big deal fashion design award for his line Benjamin Bixby. And once or twice a year he records a perfect guest verse on someone else's song.

Music: “Pink Matter” from the album *channel ORANGE* by Frank Ocean.

Since you been gone, I been having withdrawals

You were such a habit to call

I ain't myself at all, had to tell myself, "Naw

She better with some fella with a regular job"

I didn't wanna get her involved

By dinner Mr. Benjamin was sitting in awe

Hopped into my car; drove far

Far's too close, and I remember my memory's no sharp...

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: About 10 years ago, there was an Outkast tour. André talked publicly about his disabling social anxiety. But while the tour was successful, there weren't any new Outkast records. It seemed like maybe André just didn't have anything to say anymore.

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Maybe he was just, you know, retired. And then a few years ago—both unexpectedly and somehow completely unsurprisingly as well—people started posting videos on the internet of André playing the flute. Not in nightclubs, but at airports and on the sidewalk. And not as a stunt either, apparently. Everyone said he was gracious if someone said something to him, but he really just seemed to be doing it for himself.

And I think that I had a similar reaction to a lot of Outkast fans. On the one hand, I think André is the greatest rapper of all time, and that Outkast is the greatest rap group of all time, so I miss the rapping. But on the other hand, I'm glad André seemed so genuinely fulfilled just playing a flute by the arrival gate.

A few years ago, André moved to LA. He lives by the beach. And one day, by chance, he ran into Carlos Niño in a fancy grocery store. Niño is a percussionist and producer, a really accomplished percussionist and producer. And he introduced himself to André. They had some friends in common. And the two of them hatched an idea. Instead of trying to make the

next “So Fresh, So Clean” or “Hey Ya!”, what if they got together some of the world's greatest jazz musicians and made something completely, 1000% different?

The album they made, *New Blue Sun*, came out last year. It was one of the bestselling records of all time, or at least one of the bestselling ambient spiritual jazz records of all time.

Music: “Ninety-Three 'Til Infinity And Beyoncé” from the album *New Blue Sun* by André 3000, an ethereal, floaty orchestral piece woven with synth.

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: It's also really beautiful. In the last few months, André has been talking about the album, doing interviews of a kind that he hasn't done in years. He still seems to be a bit uncomfortable with it, but he's also very clearly proud of the music that he's made, and he wants to share it. He's toured too. He's headed out on tour again, and the show is breathtaking. It seems like it's 30 years since the Source Awards, and André Benjamin once again has something to say.

It was very sincerely one of the great honors of my career that André agreed to stop by our office and talk to me for *Bullseye*. Let's get into it.

Music: “I Swear, I Really Wanted to Make a 'Rap' Album, but This Is Literally the Way the Wind Blew Me This Time” from the album *New Blue Sun* by André 3000, a dreamy, percussive instrumental.

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

André 3000: Happy to be here. Thank you.

Jesse Thorn: Really nice to see you sitting in that chair.

André 3000: Yes, man. Yes, I'm here.

Jesse Thorn: You know, when I first heard that song—which, you know, kicks off the new record.

André 3000: First song, yeah.

Jesse Thorn: It reminded me of one of my like absolute favorite—it's not a song, because nobody's singing, but one of my absolute favorite tracks on any record ever, which is a track called “The Plum Blossom” by Yusef Lateef from his album *Eastern Sounds*.

André 3000: Mm! Okay, yes, *Eastern Sounds* is one of my favorites, man. Yeah.

Jesse Thorn: And that's like one of those things where the story of that record is that Yusef Lateef—who has played the saxophone as well as flute and, you know, a few other things—

was in Chinatown in New York City and picked up an instrument—I think it's called a shoon, but it might be called a zune—X-U-N.

André 3000: Yeah. I'm familiar. Yeah.

Jesse Thorn: Yeah. Like, a Chinese flute.

André 3000: Yeah. I don't know how to pronounce it, but yeah, it's X-U-N. Yeah.

Jesse Thorn: Yeah. And that's the instrument he plays on that record. It's just a thing that he found, you know, literally in like a tourist shop.

André 3000: Yeah. See, I didn't know that story.

Jesse Thorn: Sitting in a pile, you know?

André 3000: Nice! It's funny you say that, because if you say that, and you put it next to that song—that instrument that I'm playing, it's a digital wind flute. So, you blow it, you play it. It has keys just like a saxophone or any wind instrument. But I actually opened it 20 minutes before I played, so it was very new to me.

So, what you're doing, you're hearing me discover it. You know, so it's not perfect. You know, the timing is off a little bit, the keys—I have to figure out the response of the keys, the latency, all this kind of stuff. But what I loved about it most when I listen back to it is kind of like the child discovery thing.

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You know, it was very new. So, it's funny that you say he just discovered this instrument in the shop in Chinatown. Yeah, I mean, I'm sure—I mean, he's accomplished, though. He's played, you know, all these wind instruments. So, he was probably way better on the xun than I was on the digital wind instrument. But it's that discovery thing, man.

Jesse Thorn: One of the things about a flute as an instrument—right?—is there is— You know, there's the kind of flute that you picture if I'm in a drum and bugle corps or whatever kind of flute, just a classic flute. And I imagine those are relatively standardized, right? But then it's also this category of every type of instrument that's like a vessel for breathing into. (*Chuckles.*) You know, like everything with holes and a thing to blow into is a flute.

André 3000: Is a flute. Yeah, it's true. And I think it's a misconception when people think, “Oh, André's playing this flute.” You know, you may think that it's a—like you're saying—kind of like this sideways—they call it concert flute or classical flute. I've never played one of those in my life. Well, I picked it up now, you know, just to discover it now. But I started playing native flutes. And you're right, you know, if it has holes in it, you know, and it's tuned a certain way—I mean, it's a flute. You can make a flute out of anything, you know.

Jesse Thorn: What is the one that you happen to have on your lap right now?

André 3000: This is a flute made by Guillermo Martinez, who—most of my flutes are made by Guillermo. And it's a cedar, red cedar. It's a double drone flute, a Maya drone flute. And what that means is there's this drone tone that never changes, and then you have the noted side. So, you know, you can kind of play, you know—

(Plays a lilting series of notes which are underscored by a gentle drone.)

Or.

(Plays a more energetic melody.)

So, the drone side never changes. But it's—yeah, this is kind of like one of many. But the very first flute that I started playing, like going on this wind journey, was one very similar to this one. Actually in the same tuning. You know, this is in the key of E, tuned to 432 hertz. Yeah, so I started on something like this.

Jesse Thorn: Have you ever made a flute?

André 3000: Yes, I actually started, apprenticing with Guillermo to learn to make these flutes. And I destroyed my first couple of flutes. Like, it's very hard to put it on the lathe. And you know, you have to—the wood is very delicate. And if you hit it the wrong way, it'll completely gnarl and like, grr, and just tear it up. So, I've torn up about two or three. Two or three flutes. But I did make one that actually works, so I'm off to a good start.

Jesse Thorn: Did you have a particular goal when you started playing? Did you have an objective in mind?

André 3000: I think to kind of just get in any world that the people that I'm listening to—what are they feeling? Like, if they're making me feel this way while they're playing, I want to try some of that. The same way when I tried rapping. Like, rapping made me feel a way, you know? Like, so let me try it, you know? Let me try to do what people are giving to me. Let me try to do it back in a certain way.

So, it was almost just, you know, just stepping in the ring. And that's how I started just picking up wind instruments in general. Because the way I felt when I heard, you know, Coltrane or Eric Dolphy play or Sonny Rollins play, you know, Lateef play. I'm like, “Man, what is this?” You know? Like, and then they're not saying words, but they're making you feel a way. And I was like that's awesome to be able to do that, you know?

Jesse Thorn: We're going to take a quick break. When we return, we'll talk about why André 3000 has grown to dislike hearing himself rap and also how he's getting past it. It's *Bullseye*, from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

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Promo:

Jackie Kashian: Jackie Kashian. Hi, and welcome to the MaximumFun.org podcast, *The Jackie and Laurie Show*, where we talk about standup comedy and how much we love it and how much it enrages us.

Laurie Kilmartin: We have a lot of experience, and a lot of stories, and a lot of time on our hands. So, check us out. It's one hour a week, and we drop it every Wednesday on MaximumFun.org.

Transition: Thumpy synth with a syncopated beat.

Jesse Thorn: Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is André 3000. He is, of course, one half of the greatest hip-hop group of all time: Outkast. Last year, he released *New Blue Sun*, an ambient jazz record on which he plays the flute. Later this year, he'll tour the United States in support of that album. Let's get back into our conversation.

I interviewed John Cena the other day—the wrestler and actor. He was an unbelievable human being. I was like—talking to him was really a trip. And I had this friend who worked on a TV show with him. And I texted my friend, I said, “What should I ask John Cena about?”

And he said, “Well, you know, he learns something on the piano every time he takes an acting role.”

André 3000: (*Whispered.*) Nice.

Jesse Thorn: And I talked to him about this, and I just thought like—he taught himself to play piano. I thought, I will never have in any area of my life—maybe I'm selling myself short, but I do not envision myself ever having in any area of my life the clarity of vision to be like, “You know what? I'm going to sit down and learn to play this song on piano.” (*Laughs.*) No help, no one checking him.

André 3000: Yeah, I'm impressed. I mean, piano—I've messed around with piano a lot myself, but I never can learn anyone else's songs. I always just make up my own. Like, it's hard to follow another person's song. I've never been good at studying in that way. I've always been good at playing, just making it up and going. So, that's a nod to have the discipline to be able to mimic and find what someone else is doing. The patience to do it, too! Because I, you know, I'm done.

(*Jesse chuckles.*)

You know, you give up trying to find what someone else is doing.

Jesse Thorn: I feel like I couldn't ever—I have a hard time taking on anything that I can't get right. Like, the idea of sitting in the in-between space where I'm not good at it is sooo hard for me. And I'm just like, “You know what? I'm just gonna go do something with lower stakes. Just gonna go watch the baseball game.”

André 3000: You gotta love it, you know? I'm sure if I talked to Cena, he'd probably be like, “Man, I love that song so much that I wanted to get close to it.” And that's what kept him engaged, probably. You know?

Jesse Thorn: Speaking of studying, years ago, I interviewed Big Boi, your partner in Outkast. And before I say this, let me just say: the man obviously loves you.

André 3000: Of course! It's mutual, man.

Jesse Thorn: I think the one clarification he wanted to make about Outkast was he was the good student. (*Laughs.*)

André 3000: Yes, that is true! Yeah, totally. I dropped out of high school and Big Boi continued. Big Boi had a high grade-point average. He's a very intelligent, smart guy. Yeah, he's totally right about that.

Jesse Thorn: Well, you're both intelligent, smart guys, right?

André 3000: Yeah, I mean, in different ways. I made bad choices in schooling. I think Big Boi was actually—if I'm not mistaken, he was gonna go to college to study, um... psychology, I think.

Jesse Thorn: That sounds right to me.

André 3000: And I was gonna go to art school if none of this (*sensor beep*) worked out.

(*They chuckle.*)

That was the way, you know? So, you can tell where his mind was, you know.

Jesse Thorn: He reminds me of a running back, like a great running back where he can drag the pile. You know what I mean? He's got the—he's got a joyful vibe. Like, he's not just miserable doing it, but there's a certain amount of just like, “Let's go. Like, here we go.”

André 3000: Yeah. Yeah, he's he stays the course, man. Like, I've been very blessed to have a person like Big Boi in my life.

Jesse Thorn: What did your teacher think of you when you were in school?

André 3000: I was the artful kid, man. Like, my teachers, they kind of loved talent. Like, I would be drawing in class, and all the kids would be around watching me draw. And those—like drawing, literature were my kind of like favorite courses. Everything else was like, meh. I hated math. I hate numbers to this day. I hate numbers. Like, they—I hate exacts. You know what I mean? Like, I don't like that.

Jesse Thorn: When you started messing up in school, did your teachers write you off? Or was there a certain amount of that kind of disappointment of “the special kid is not doing the thing I wish he would do”?

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André 3000: No, my mom was really strict on me. So, even when I started messing up, I was—there was always a way to get back to it. Because I mean, up until tenth grade high school, I mean—I was pretty much under my mom's thumb to do well. So, I did well in school. I didn't enjoy it. Yeah, and then tenth grade hit, and life hit, and you just never look back. You know.

Jesse Thorn: There's an Outkast record where you describe yourself as having an only child style. I've always been touched by that.

Music: “Two Dope Boyz (*In a Cadillac*)” from the album *ATLiens* by Outkast.

This ol' sucka MC stepped up to me

Challenged André to a battle, and I stood there patiently

As he spit and stumbled over cliches, so called freestyling

Whole purpose just to make me feel low, I guess you wilding

I say, "Look, boy, I ain't for that—, So— this

"Let me explain 'only child' style, so you don't dis"

I grew up to myself, not round no park bench

Just a— busting flows off in apartments

(Music fades out.)

André 3000: Yeah, it's a real thing. Only child is—you gotta think—you grow up in your brain, and you don't have to respond to anyone. You know, you don't have a brother or a sister to kind of—to have to share. You know, so in your mind you think, “Well, if I'm good, the rest of the world is good.” And that's not how it is really, you know. So, only child style is

a limited kind of way of thinking. But when you have that time to yourself, you ponder great things sometimes. You know, I think because you have more time to study. You know.

Jesse Thorn: My comedy partner, John Hodgman, in one of his old shows had a line that he said he was a member of the Only Children Super Smart Afraid of Conflict Narcissists Club.

André 3000: (*Cackling.*) Yep! Yep! That sounds like me! Yep, that is. Yep, yep, yep. I'm part of that. I hate conflict, man. Like, yeah, I despise it. It's like, you know why? It's like—I just feel like everything can be worked out.

Jesse Thorn: I mean, that line is in the context of you telling a story of—maybe an apocryphal story or a metaphorical story of somebody trying to battle you on a train or a bus or something like that.

André 3000: Yeah, I'm—yeah, I'm sorry, go ahead.

Jesse Thorn: And you just being like, “You know what? I don't need this.”

André 3000: Yeah, I didn't mean to cut you off, but I was—I'm laughing, because it's so timely. Because in the last couple of days, you know, you kind of—in retrospect, you think of like, “Wow, I actually had a whole career rapping. And then I don't think—I don't know if I was cut out to be a rapper really.”

Jesse Thorn: Really?

André 3000: No, I really don't. Like, I probably should have been a writer or something.

Jesse Thorn: (*Playfully.*) I mean, you were awful. To be fair, you were awful at it, André.

André 3000: (*Laughs.*) No, what I mean by that is like I don't like confrontation. Like, I'm not no battle rapper. Like, I really—I just don't be giving a (*sensor beep*) about what another rapper thinks in that way. So, it's I'll just be looking at you crazy like if you try to battle. It's like, oh, nice style, but your style has nothing to do with what I'm doing. And what I'm doing has nothing to do with you. So, why are we even going through this exercise, unless—? It's really for the crowd, more than anything.

Jesse Thorn: It's a game, right? I mean like it's a game that people enjoy playing.

André 3000: I don't. I don't. 'Cause I don't know how to play that game, because what I do has nothing to do with you. So, it's a futile game. So, that's why I say I don't know if I was built for rapping in that way. So, I mean, even to this day, like I made a pact with myself that if I get dissed by a rapper—I mean, he'll just be rapping to the air. Like, I won't say nothing. You know, I'll just let him have at it, you know.

But I mean, if someone comes at you in that way, I just take whatever that energy is and put it into what I'm creating at the time. You know, because that's where my power lies. Like, I

don't—you kind of got to work with your strengths. And my strengths ain't, you know, battle rapping nobody. My strengths are creating.

Jesse Thorn: When I picture you as a 17-year-old or whatever, working on a verse—you know, I know people that when they're working on a verse, they're playing a beat in their headphones or on the speakers, or they're banging on something, and they're working it out, you know, saying the different stuff and whatever. And you know, they're not necessarily—sometimes they're freestyling, but sometimes they're half and half, something like that. I picture you with a pen in your hand. You know what I mean? I picture you crossing stuff out and writing in a new thing.

André 3000: Uhh, I don't really write. And what I mean by that—I am a writer, but I don't physically write, really. It's almost like a game of repetition. And then you add on, you tack on, tack on, tack on, tack on, until you're done.

Jesse Thorn: Are you doing it outside the context of recording, or are you doing it on the tape, or on the digital tape?

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Like, punching it in, or—?

André 3000: Nah, nah, I come from an era where we didn't punch in. Like, punching in—I won't say it's a new technique, 'cause Slick Rick used it really well back in the day. But punching in is actually a now thing. Like it's: okay, I do this line, I do this line, I do this line, do this line, do this line. But I came from a you write that thing as a whole thing and say it. If you don't have enough breath, that's just on you. You know. Punching in wasn't—it was almost like a letdown if you had to punch in. So, I start it, you know, and then I finish it.

But it's—the practice is either walking with headphones on, or I'm in the car with the beat playing. And I just keep going in my head, saying things until I get to an end. And some things work, some things don't. You make a left, you detour if that don't work. And then at the end, it's done, you know?

Jesse Thorn: Is it like—? You know, a lot of the verses that you've recorded in the last, I guess, 15ish years since you stopped making your own rap albums are verses on remixes of hit records. Is that because those were playing in your headphones just because they're playing in the world, and they just made a little bit of—? Like, sometimes when I'm watching comedy, I see somebody say a setup, and I think of a punchline for it.

André 3000: Yes! Yeah, yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know. Yeah. It's all—what I say, it's always easier to go to someone else's party than throw your own party and have to do all the, you know, drinks. And so, it's always easier to be invited to someone else's vibe that they have. And then you just, you know, add on to it.

Music: “Throw Some D’s (*Remix*) from the album *Rich Boy* by Rich Boy.

Ain't a hood (hood), but a brother from the ho-od

See, mama stayed on me, so I turned out pretty go-od

But if you wanna try, sucker, now then we can do it

Ha-ha, sleep, Tylenol PM if I pull it

Sh-sh-sheep, count 'em for the rest of your life

Yeah, yeah your partner got away, but now he vegetable-like

So-so I sent his mom and dad a whole case of V8

He can die any second, how much longer it's 'gon take?

Go and get it over with, oh, what if you were in my loafers then?

(Music fades out.)

André 3000: Guest verses are much easier. Like, I'm not even sure if I was meant to be a solo artist, you know what I mean? Some people are just not, you know. I've never come out with a solo record, you know. So, I'm not sure if I was meant to be a solo artist in that way. I mean, *The Love Below* was I guess a solo album, you know. But yeah, I'm not sure if, in rap terms, if I even want to hear me that much. You know what I mean?

Jesse Thorn: Sometimes I worry that, in rap terms, you don't want to hear yourself at all!

André 3000: You know what?! Actually, the older I get, I actually hate to hear myself rap. So, it's a thing. And I'm trying to get—I'm trying to find a way around it. Because two things are going on. I'm not sure I like hearing myself rap as I age, because I actually hear the time. I hear the age. But at the same time, the challenge in me—like, I want to do it, because it would be a great feat for myself. Not everybody. Like, (*sensor beep*) everybody else, (*sensor beep*) the rap world, fame, all that kind of stuff. For myself.

Any artists that tell you it's for them, they're lying. It's for yourself first, so if it's for me, I would love to be able to accomplish that at this age. You see—well, what is your mind? How—what are you saying right now? How would you say it?

Jesse Thorn: I mean, obviously for decades, rap was a world of 19- through 23-year-olds. (*Chuckles.*) You know what I mean? Like, it was really dominated by that. That's changed in recent years to some extent. But like, just by virtue of the fact that—you know, I mean, Big Daddy Kane and Jay-Z are in their 50s. But like, there are rappers whose art was about stuff that is post-adolescent, which is great. But like, I have no concern about whether if—in 2024, as a guy in his late 40s, early 50s or whatever, however old he is—Scarface has something to say in a verse.

André 3000: Yeah, everybody has something to say, man. Like, and I think age does not make you a wack-er rapper in no kind of way. What I do think happens though, I think the world—the zeitgeist of the world—is moving. It moves fast, and it's listened to everything you've done before. So, I don't think rappers get wack-er as they get older, none of that kind of stuff. But I do think the world—

[00:30:00]

And I think hip-hop is kind of like a recipe, a certain kind of special recipe. And certain recipes call for fresh ingredients. And I totally feel that way. And some recipes taste better when they have fresher ingredients. Not that, you know, frozen peas can't get the job done. But fresh peas taste different. And I just feel like in hip-hop, I prefer fresher ingredients.

And it doesn't sit right with a lot of rappers. And I'm sorry in that way, but I just have to be honest. That's just my personal opinion, man. But I mean, there's people like Ace killing it. Like, you know, older rappers killing it. It's not—like I said, it's not about getting wack-er or none of that (*cursor beep*).

Jesse Thorn: Masta Ace is out here making great records in 2024.

André 3000: Yeah! It don't make you wack-er. Yeah. No kinda way. My ears have always just popped up to what's fresh.

Jesse Thorn: On the other side of a quick break. We will finish up with André 3000. The first Outkast album came out more than 30 years ago. André's music has been the soundtrack to the lives of thousands, maybe millions of people. So, how does that sit with him?

We'll talk about it. It's *Bullseye* from [MaximumFun.org](https://www.maximumfun.org) and NPR.

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Promo:

(*Phone rings.*)

Music: Relaxed string music.

Benjamin Partridge: Hello. Podcast Recommendation Service.

Client: (*With an exaggeratedly posh transatlantic accent.*) Hello there, young man! I'm looking for a new podcast to listen to. Something amusing perhaps.

Benjamin: Oh, what about *Beef and Dairy Network*?

Client: Something surreal and satirical.

Benjamin: Well, I would suggest *Beef and Dairy Network*.

Client: Ideally it would be a spoof industry podcast for the beef and dairy industries.

Benjamin: Yes, *Beef and Dairy Network*.

Client: Maybe it would have brilliant guests such as Josie Long, Heather Anne Campbell, Nick Offerman, and the actor Ted Danson.

Benjamin: *Beef and Dairy Network!*

Client: I don't know, I think I'm going to stick to *Joe Rogan*.

Music: Upbeat synth.

Benjamin: *The Beef and Dairy Network* podcast is a multi-award-winning comedy podcast, and you can find it at MaximumFun.org or wherever you get your podcasts.

(Music fades out.)

Transition: Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

Jesse Thorn: Welcome back to *Bullseye*; I'm Jesse Thorn. I'm talking with one of my favorite musicians of all time, André 3000. With Big Boi, he is—of course—half of Outkast. Late last year, he released his first solo album. It's an instrumental jazz record on which he plays the flute. It's called *New Blue Sun*. Later this year, he'll set out on a national tour performing songs from the album. Let's get back into my conversation.

I want to play a little bit of one of the more recent rap records you recorded on a Kanye West track from a few years ago. And the song is called “Life of the Party”, and I just think it's a really beautiful verse, and I wanted to listen to it a little bit.

André 3000: Thank you, boss.

Music: “Life of the Party” from the album *Donda* by Kanye West.

Hey, Miss Donda

You run into my mama, please tell her I said, "Say something."

I'm starting to believe ain't no such thing as Heaven's trumpets

No after-over, this is it, done

If there's a Heaven, you would think they'd let ya speak to your son

Maybe she has, in the form of a baby's laugh

I heard passing by in a stroller, reminding me, "Hey, keep rolling"

I don't know, maybe she has with a prick of a blade of grass

I've been laying on way too long, got me itchy

Got up and roamed a lil' more

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: I mean, if there's ever a question about “is there a place in hip-hop for middle age”, this is a beautiful verse about remembering your parents who passed.

André 3000: Yeah, man. I mean, that was thanks to Kanye, man. That was the great—you know, he invited me to the party. You know? And I think, once again, age played a great part in that verse, because I'd lived long enough to go through my parents' passing. So. I mean, I don't know if I could have done that at 19, you know, or 18. So, the advantage of people getting older is experience, more than anything. You know. So, yeah, that verse. I wish *(chuckles)*—every time I hear that version of it without the sample—there's a sample that we had to take out. Like, it's like a hit. *(Mimics the sound.)* That makes it move a certain way. I always go back to the YouTube version with that in it.

(Jesse laughs.)

[00:35:00]

Yeah. But yeah, man. That was Kanye's doing to invite me to that party. He was working on *Donda*. And he had sent the whole album. He was like, “Yeah, check it out, man. Tell me what you think.” And I immediately felt that, wow, this album is called *Donda*. It would be great to actually like just involve your mom. Like, go talk to her in a way. So, it was kind of like I was trying to repeat the *Donda* thing.

So, we had both lost our moms. Both of my parents had passed, but it was a thing that I could speak to clearly. So, that was an opportunity for me to be able to say it. I don't know where else I would've put that verse, you know? So, I'm happy.

Jesse Thorn: When you lost both of your parents as an only child, that's a pretty intense place to be. Especially—you're not married. You do have—you have a son, so you're not without family in the world. But you don't have the generation that went behind you, and you don't have the generation next to you. You don't have siblings next to you.

André 3000: Yeah. When you lose the people that made you, that's a different feeling, man. Like, you know you're in a different place. Losing your parents is something you can't explain to anybody until it happens to them. You know, it's not a thing you can, say, get ready for or anything. You know, it's just one of those things that happens. Yeah, losing parents is like you lose the two people that actually made you. That puts mortality on your head. It shows you, oh, we're all going down this way. You know?

Jesse Thorn: Your dad wasn't married when he died. And you're not.

(André confirms.)

Is that something that you thought about when he passed away?

André 3000: Uh, no. No, I didn't. I didn't—well, I thought about him more than anything, because I spent time with him like in his last few days. You know, in the hospital. So, we got to talk a lot. So, he—you know, he gave me a lot of information that I didn't have, you know, while we were kind of like thriving. But it made me—after he passed, it made me think like, wow, how happy—because he smiled; he was like a really happy dude. But you kind of wonder like, well, how happy were you? You know, like towards the end of his life, it's like there's not many people around.

You know, and I'm his son. *(Stammering.)* You know, I'm an entertainer. I'm coming up to the hospital; it's kind of just me. So, like... you know, I mean, he had sisters. Which is, you know, my aunties and cousins in that way. But immediately, like I'm in the city. Like, right there. And it just makes you kind of think about, you know, your surroundings, think about life. And like, I have a son. There is this joke that if you have sons, you might get put in the funeral home. I mean, not in a funeral home, but in an old folk's home. But if you have daughters, you'll be taken care of. *(Laughs.)* So, it's like, wow, I don't have daughters. You know? So, I don't know. I got to find a way to get on the beach somewhere.

Jesse Thorn: I read somewhere that when you were in your mid-30s, your mom kind of sat you down and told you about like the hardest times in her life, that she had been using when you were like preschool and elementary.

André 3000: Five, yeah.

Jesse Thorn: Why do you think she told you that?

André 3000: I think she saw me going down a similar path. Like, I don't have like a drug addiction or anything, but I think she saw me smoking a lot, you know. And she knows I have a lot of plans in life, and I think she did it, because she saw me probably like... maybe taking too much time—you know?—to get to my plans or things that I wanted to do.

So, I think it was her way of saying, “Hey, this is the hardest version of that. You know, like and I had to look up one day and figure that I hadn't done what I needed to do.” And I think that was her way of giving me some hard (inaudible), like hard. Yeah.

Jesse Thorn: How did hearing that affect you?

André 3000: It's crazy. Like, I think her timing was perfect. Because I think if she would have told me at 15, "Yeah, I smoked crack," I probably would have looked at her crazy. But at 35, it immediately made me look at her like a goddess. Like, because I was like, "Whoa, you've gone through this whole life. You fought through that." You know, and I know people could never get off crack.

[00:40:00]

So, it made me look at her like a strong goddess and like, whoa, I never knew this. So, I will say: parents, sometimes telling your kids your worst makes them human, you know, in a cool—a God human, you know.

Jesse Thorn: Another of my favorite of your more recent verses, your verses since you stopped making your own rap albums, is on a Devin the Dude song.

André 3000: Oh, "What a Job".

Jesse Thorn: Yeah, it's just one of my—just a wonderful, wonderful song. Devin's maybe my favorite rapper not sitting in this room.

André 3000: Man, Devin is raw, man.

Jesse Thorn: I really love Devin. He is a—my experience with him is that he's a very—a lovely man too. But I wanna play a little bit of this verse.

Music: "What a Job" from the album *Waitin' to Inhale* by Devin the Dude.

(Hell no!) Yeah, exactamundo

But we just keep recording and it ain't to get no condo

And Candy Bentley fanny with no panties in Miami

And that cute lil' chick named Tammy that you took to the Grammys

See, we do it for that boy that graduated

That looked you in your eyes real tough and say "'preciate it"

And that he wouldn't have made it if it wasn't for your CD number nine

And he's standing with his baby momma, Kiki, and she crying

Talking 'bout that they used to get high to me in high school

And they used to make love to me in college

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: One of the things that I love about that record is it's such a beautiful distillation of the challenge and the gift of making art that touches people. You know? Like, if I was sitting here with... I'm speaking very broadly here, but like take a truly great rapper like Ludacris, right? Ludacris has made some very deeply emotional and personal songs as well. But like, the Ludacris songs that have most touched people's lives are songs where he said a bunch of great and often funny stuff in great ways, and everybody had a party. You know what I mean? *(Chuckles.)*

And that's great. Like, that's a wonderful way to touch people's lives. But I'm sure when people come up to Ludacris—if they're talking to him about his hit records, they're just saying like, “Man, like I listened to your song at my junior prom or whatever it was, and it was a party. It was lit.” You know? And I think a lot of people probably who come up to you to talk about something, a way that you've touched their lives—sure, it is touching those moments in their lives, which is one of the things you rap about. But your work is so personal and emotional that it's a different vibe.

André 3000: Yeah.

Jesse Thorn: And that is like an incredible thing to see when someone talks to you in that way. But I know even from my own experience as an F-list celebrity, that it's also a little—

(They chuckle.)

It's also a little scary, you know?

André 3000: *(Laughing.)* The F-list.

Jesse Thorn: Yeah, well. You know, I did a voice on *Archer*, so I'm not on the G list.

André 3000: Let's go! Yeah, let's go.

Jesse Thorn: But like, it's also incredible to have someone share something like that with you. But it also—like, there's a part of me that just wants to turn and run away also. Like, both of those things at the same time, you know?

André 3000: Well, it's kind of—*(sighs)*. When you make a thing, and it affects people's lives, I think what I get out of it is: if I were to die right now as we were sitting here, if I were to die tomorrow, I mattered. And that's all you can really ask for. I mean, and that's—if you're talking about, you know, these thoughtful verses, or you're talking about party songs. And I

don't rate them as one is better than another one. It's like some comedies are just so great that—you know, and they weigh up to drama.

So, it's not like, you know, I look at one better than another one. It's just like you were the soundtrack, or you affect someone's life in a certain way that they won't forget. It's almost like a smell. Like, sometimes a smell can take you back to a certain time in life. Songs do the same thing. So, I'm just happy that I can connect in that way. Because I think as humans, everybody really wanna—we just want to connect, you know. We want to almost say like, “Do you feel that?” You know, basically that's kind of, “Am I the only one feeling this?”

So, that's really what—and you get confirmation when those moments happen. So, I'm just happy that, you know, people are like, “Oh yeah, thumbs up. You know, yeah, I feel that. I feel that.”

Jesse Thorn: You don't just want to go back to your apartment and close the door and eat some breakfast cereal? (*Laughs.*)

André 3000: Nah, nah, nah. Nah, no, no, no. It's—yeah, it's really like you do it to connect.

[00:45:00]

If not, you can just be at home rapping to yourself or rapping to your neighborhood. Like, you do it, you put it out there to connect. Anyone that says, “Oh yeah, I don't care.” No, you care. If not, you would not put it out for other people to check out. So, yeah, we want to connect.

Jesse Thorn: It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest André 3000 is, of course, a rapper, a composer, and a musician. He's also very serious about men's clothes. About ten years ago, André won the Best New Designer Award from the Council of Fashion Designers of America for his line, Benjamin Bixby. And please, take it from me—part time professional menswear writer, Jesse Thorn—the clothes were gorgeous. In fact, (*chuckles*) I will here and now admit: I wore a pair of pants from it to this interview.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Jesse Thorn: I mean, to me, one of the most wonderful parts of making clothes—and I've only like—I've had clothes made for myself or made accessories, but there's just like no better feeling to me than pawing through a pile of textiles and like picking something and thinking about what it could be.

André 3000: Yep! I did that when we first started Benjamin Bixby. Like, I didn't know what I was doing, man. I never designed clothes in my life. I designed like my costume for stage and stuff like that, but I never knew what it took, you know. And to—Chris Roark, sourcing guy, he introduced me to—it's like a fabric show in Paris where you go, and it's like a sea of fabric. You know, and you just go, and you pick what you want. And it ended up being Benjamin Bixby.

And you know, I didn't know anything about the pricing of fabrics or, you know, what the cost of this garment will land at, anything. So, it was just like, you know, amateur fabric picking. But just to be in that space and find the right tartans or find the right cashmeres of—you know? Like, and these houses that make these fabrics in these different countries that have made them for centuries, that's amazing to me, man! Like, it's kinda awesome.

Jesse Thorn: One of my greatest disappointments in life is that at one point I was making videos about menswear, and I was in New York; we'd shot for a few days, and I realized that I had left my passport in Los Angeles. And we were about to go to Milan. And so, I missed a day of shooting, because I had left my passport behind. Somebody had to get my passport to me in New York. And I missed this day where my producer, hosting in my stead, got to go into the like cave—literal cave—where Luciano Barbera, the Italian clothing and especially textile magnate, like kept woolens so that they would be at the perfect humidity.

I'm just like, ugh! I missed the cave with Signore Barbera!

André 3000: Yeah, man. I've had some—like, some of the best times of my life, I'm gonna say like 2006/2007, were going around the world building Benji Bixby. Like, that was some of the most fun times of my life, being in Florence and riding like two hours outside of Florence to go to these families that sew jackets. That's what they do. They've done it for centuries. And I'm looking at Tom Ford jackets. I'm looking at Ralph Lauren jackets. And they're sewing Benji Bixby jackets. I'm like, whoa, what is going on?!

And being in—even in Hong Kong, you know, like in certain factories in Hong Kong, like just seeing the work that happens, that goes into these garments. I know Hong Kong gets—well, China in general, they get a bad rap. But there's some great quality stuff being made out of those places, too. But those are some of the most fun times of my life, actually seeing these families. Yeah, they're families that pass down this trade to their family, and they're still doing it. And right there, you know, this is the granddaughter still doing it. And I'm like, wow.

Jesse Thorn: That's said, these days you're very committed to long sleeve Realtree camo t-shirts.

André 3000: Yeah, I have a uniform at this point. Because I don't like to think about it. Like, and I have like maybe 40 or 50 of these, you know. Because it is really at this point a uniform, because it's comfortable, and I just don't have to think.

Jesse Thorn: And you're wearing hickory stripe overalls too, like a train conductor.

André 3000: Yeah, yeah, yeah. It's very freeing to have a uniform. You know.

[00:50:00]

You can spend time thinking of other stuff. Yeah.

Jesse Thorn: Well, André, I'm so grateful for your time. And you know, what can I say? You rap in that in that one record about somebody saying to you, "I wouldn't have made it if it wasn't for your CD number nine," and that's how I feel about your work.

André 3000: Well, man, I'm glad that I could connect and do something that people connect with and care about. You know, that's really—that's kinda—that's the goal, you know, to be able to express yourself, and people respond to it.

(Music fades in.)

Jesse Thorn: André 3000, everybody. There it is. You can catch him on tour performing songs from his album *New Blue Sun* all over the United States. We'll have a link to dates on the *Bullseye* page at MaximumFun.org. And if I can take this opportunity to ask you a quick favor: if you enjoyed this interview—I know that I did. It's one of the proudest moments of my career, to be honest with you. I hope that you will share it with somebody.

We don't have a promotions-and-marketing budget. So, I'm relying on you to tell a friend who might enjoy it. You can share the YouTube version, or you can share it from your podcast app. You can share the link to NPR.org, whatever it is. And if they're into it, maybe share another hip-hop interview—you know, Rakim, or Eve was just last week. Or share something you think they might like, Tom Hanks or something.

In fact, Shabaka Hutchings, who plays on André's record and has performed with him in many contexts, was on the show a year or two ago. And I really love that one. So, if they're a jazz fan, send them Shabaka. Anyway, I really appreciate your help on that.

Music: "That Night In Hawaii When I Turned Into A Panther And Started Making These Low Register Purring Tones That I Couldn't Control ... Shyt Was Wild" from the album *New Blue Sun* by André 3000, a slow, contemplative wind piece.

(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. I went on tour last week with the *Judge John Hodgman* podcast, and I want to thank my wife. Because when I got back, both my children and my jalapeno plant were alive.

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 editor is Daniel Speer. We get booking help from Mara Davis, Atlanta's own. Mara earned every penny she's ever been paid by booking this one.

Our interstitial music is by DJW, also known as Dan Wally, who was kind enough to chat through a few things about this interview with me before I did it. The first thing Dan said to me was like, "An hour? You could do an hour on 'SpottieOttieDopaliscious'." Our theme song is "Huddle Formation", written and recorded by The Go! Team. Thanks to them. Thanks to their label, Memphis Industries.

Bullseye is on Instagram. Look, go check us out. [@BullseyeWithJesseThorn](#). See the pictures of me and the beautiful André 3000. We're also on Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook. Seek us out there as well. Make sure and smash that subscribe button on YouTube. And I think that's about it. Just remember, all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

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

(Music fades out.)

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