

[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. This past August, my guest MAVI released his third full-length album. He's an emcee from Charlotte, North Carolina—sort of a “your favorite rapper's favorite rapper” type. In 2022, he released *Laughing So Hard It Hurts*, a top 10 for a lot of critics that year. It was beautifully raw.

Music: “High John” from the album *Laughing So Hard It Hurts* by MAVI.

Praying they still make love in my size

Sober up and wipe the crust out my eyes

My last integrity and trust a trail of crumbs for my bride

Is it a return or a failure to succumb to the tide?

When Charlotte people seen folks cherish me was such a surprise

They seeing something we not

Since doctors sliced open my stomach at five

More often than not at sustenance a nah before a nod

It's stock in the Glock

I'm crashing if it's eye for an eye

Poppa taught me a lot

Love and disrespect is all we abide

I had to get a check, I wanted a commune

Either a big BM or a Benz for my mom

Soon popping benzos turned her grin into monsoon

A long June the summer after

We made the turn on the long route for the plunder

Casted in small rooms knitting heart loom

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: MAVI followed up the success of *Laughing* with *shadowbox*, his third album. And if you were expecting something more mainstream—maybe some beats you could play at the club or features from platinum emcees, *shadowbox* isn't that kind of record. It's contemplative, and it's even more dense and raw and interior than its predecessor.

On *Shadowbox*, the first drums you hear don't show up until the third track, called “i did”. And even when they do, it's not a booming 808. It's more like an anxious watch ticking.

Music: “i did” from the album *Shadowbox* by MAVI—an energetic drumline under a relaxed melody.

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: MAVI sometimes sounds like he's swimming in his own self-doubt and anxiety. He's brutally honest and profoundly insightful. Here's a part of the song “open waters”.

Music: “open waters” from the album *shadowbox* by MAVI.

God forbid a nick betwixt my ribs I don't know how to fix

My house is where my bed is and my skeletons and traumas live

For my kin, I'll be a pillar for a pall to lift

I know I never call enough, I promise it was all for them

Far from home, dissolving gills before I crawled or hopped, I'd swim

Tryna find how far I get, it's nausea when I cross the limit

I just want it all to empty, I just wanna ball into the darkness

Of this smallness in me, like when we was all was children

They want that old MAVI back and I just wanted Omavi back

Stealing glimpses through a post or through glass

Boasting, just a soul and clothes on it

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: It's a haunting album that lingers long after it's finished playing. You can think about a line like, "I'll be a pillar for a pall to lift" for hours. Before we get into my interview with MAVI, here's another song from *shadowbox*, I'm So Tired.

Music: "i'm so tired" from the album *shadowbox* by MAVI.

Today, my grandmother turn 80

And I'm on three Percocets, I ain't even ate yet

Flippin' through the chicken, fingertips get stained red

Yet Benjamin 'nem crippling, I can't make it make sense, I just try to make peace

I'm rolling with this 30 like lurking with Dave East

The AMG swerving, I was worthless on these same streets

I made it out, I ain't too worried if they claim me

Mainly, if we ain't co-parent this pain, prefer you hate me

The only certainty luring me into Hades lately

Persephone flirt with me, I was seven first heard her sing

Since then, Heaven a blur to me, every step, exes hurting me

Turn to blessing and courtesy, I ate off this fork in the road

Made a lil' morsel of crow, flamed up a torch with the coals

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: MAVI, welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm so happy to have you back on the show. It's nice to see you again.

MAVI: Thank you for having me again, Jesse. Why the *(censor beep)*—can I curse?

Jesse Thorn: No, but it's okay. *(Chuckles.)*

MAVI: Oh. *(Laughing.)* Why the heck would you introduce me with that audio clip?

Jesse Thorn: Look, we're playing the new—we're out here playing the new singles, MAVI. We're playing the new singles. You're not always that upset about the way your life is going.

MAVI: Man, that one? That one was so crazy, because I knew I wanted it to be a single, and like I shot the music video and everything. And then like it didn't occur to me until I posted the video on Instagram. I'm like, "Oh no, my mom's gonna hear this." And now not only my mom, but every mom who listens to *Bullseye* will also hear that. So, thank you, Jesse.

Jesse Thorn: That's true. How do you feel about that? What did your mom think about it?

MAVI: We don't talk about that one. *(Laughs.)* She talks about the other one, but we don't talk about that one. That one's a rough one.

[00:05:00]

That one's a rough one.

Jesse Thorn: What's it like to know that you made a record like that, and that piece of you is not just out there for your parents and whatever, but also for anyone in the world who chooses to listen?

MAVI: It's vulnerable. And it makes you feel really small, but then it makes the scary things in your life also feel really small. You know? It's like if you like climb Machu Picchu, you know? It's like, "Wow, my rent is due tomorrow, and I don't care, because I'm on top of Machu Picchu." But then... yeah, as small as you feel in the ocean or on top of a mountain and how small your problems become at those places is like what happens to my woes when I like spread them across like the boundless universes, you know?

Jesse Thorn: I mean, I'll tell you that listening to that song first and hearing you rap about having three Percocets in you before you have breakfast—and the audience at home can't see that you're wearing a Whitney Houston t-shirt.

MAVI: Oh man! God, Jesse.

Jesse Thorn: Like, the resonance of that is hard to avoid.

MAVI: Yeah, man, I think like... I think for me, hip-hop is a genre of art that thrives on juxtaposition, you know? Jay-Z works, because he's aspirational to the drug dealer in you and to the like not rich—like future millionaire capitalist in you at the same time. So, like while I am MAVI—like, MAVI as in like the young, attractive, well-known, early 20-something—on the scene, in the studios, in the clubs, I'm also somebody's grandson as well. So, like juxtaposing like, “This is what I do, and this is what I do. And they happen at the same time sometimes.” I think like that's really—that can be really poignant and really compelling.

Jesse Thorn: Jay-Z also, I think, appeals to the nerd in you as well, secretly.

MAVI: Absolutely! Exactly. The nerd, exactly. *(Laughs.)* Yeah, we love—a hip-hop listener loves hearing a word that you are impressed by yourself knowing from somebody that you wouldn't expect to also know that word.

Jesse Thorn: I mean, I used to—when I was a younger man, my mom was a college professor, and I used to go into her pop culture class. And we would explicate the Jay-Z song “Threat”. “Threat” is like this song that goes—like, it's like—especially, the second verse is this sort of like complicated, multilayered set of metaphors and wordplay about like the desert, and Las Vegas, and being buried, and all these different like things going on that are couched in Jay-Z just like rapping in a way where you're just like, “Oh, this is just a cool guy acting cool.” *(Laughs.)* You know what I mean?

MAVI: Literally. Yeah, the song begins with somebody saying they'll chop you up and put you in the mattress like drug money. That making it to a pop culture class is like—oh, that's nothing short of amazing. *(Laughs.)*

Jesse Thorn: How are you feeling these days?

MAVI: *(Beat.)* Um. Lonely. But... I am learning to like hanging out with myself more and more every day. They don't tell you that that's something you need to learn. You know? For a while, I was like my least favorite guy to hang out with. Not only like to the point of like, “I don't want to hang out with this guy,” but like to the point of like, “Don't leave me in a room alone with this guy.” And so, I've been doing some exposure therapy to myself lately.

Jesse Thorn: How do you manage it?

[00:10:00]

MAVI: *(Beat. Sighs.)* Well, it helps that a lot of people that I would lean onto in those awkward times of loneliness, like 3 in the morning, or like 1:30 in the afternoon, they all have me blocked.

(Jesse laughs.)

So, I'm kinda—

Jesse Thorn: They just got it on Do Not Disturb. They're just asleep, MAVI.

MAVI: Oh no. No, no. Not this time Jesse. But beyond that, it's like... I realize that I like stuff—I like to do certain things by myself that I didn't do as much, because I was almost never by myself. And just getting back into those things.

Jesse Thorn: Do you have siblings?

MAVI: Yes. And that's a part of it. I've never really lived in a house with no one, you know? So, like being around no one is like really—like, my inner child can't get jiggy with that, you know?

Jesse Thorn: I know exactly what you mean, because in my family—my wife and I have been together since we were teenagers, and my wife grew up with two siblings, and lots of cousins that were always at her house, and two parents who were always there, and—you know, everybody really tight, busy all the time. And I'm my mother's only child, and I have two half-brothers on the other side. But they're much younger than me.

So, I thought like I knew what it was like to have siblings, because I—you know, I love my brothers and everything. But like when everybody is out of the house for me, I'm like, “WHEW. Oh, thank god everybody's out of the house.” (*Laughs.*) I love all these people that live in my house, but like, I'm like, (*heavy sigh of relief*). Like, I'm sitting in a shed in my backyard right now like, “Oh, no one can reach me here.”

MAVI: No, no, no. When everybody leaves, my body—well, you know, I think it's like drugs too. Like, I'm weaning myself off of the necessity of other people's company, but with nobody around, I start feeling like so panicked. Like, existentially. I don't know. So, I've been working on that. You know. And I think just letting myself be bored to the point that I got the brain space from like a zero point to get back into like my interests for real, has made it better. Because like there are things that make you feel less lonely because you're distracting yourself from yourself, and there are things that make you feel less lonely because you're directing yourself towards yourself. And I'm trying to do those things.

Jesse Thorn: When my children and wife went to up to the Bay Area to visit her family and left me here in Southern California, I was like out of the house, doing chores. Then I'm like in the house, cleaning up. I hate cleaning up. I'm not one of these people that gets satisfied by cleaning up. But I'm like cleaning and cleaning and cleaning. And I'm like—I couldn't find the quietude to like watch television. (*Laughs.*) Like, even that was not enough action for me to calm myself down.

MAVI: Yeah. I'd be so pent up. Yeah. I don't know. And so, also because like I'm 25 this year. That's why—you know, I have to buy a house and stuff. But eventually, I begin to be on the clock to have a family of my own. Right? And I would like to get along with myself a lot better before I reenter that cycle of like never being alone again.

Jesse Thorn: What precipitated this point in your life? Was it just getting older? Was it being in a position that you could live on your own and not with roommates or with your parents? Or what?

MAVI: About like wanting to get along better with myself?

Jesse Thorn: Yeah, and just being in a position where you were realizing that you were lonely and having room to be lonely.

MAVI: Well, I think it's because like, I'm like a—I'm a real people pleaser. And I'm like the life of the party. Like, I like to show everybody a good time. I like to buy the round of drinks. I like to call the homie like, “Hey, let's go to lunch.” And I like formed some emotional codependences that were really toxic.

[00:15:00]

And when they got withdrawn from my life, I realized, “Ooh, somebody is occupying me in some form like all day.” Like, all day. It's a handoff from one person to the other person to the other person to the other person. And when I stopped having a person who was like doing a lot of the relay of me—right?—like in the awkward times that I was talking about before, then it made me realize like, “Ooh, man. You have a million friends. You have a million people who listen to your voice every day. You have a loving family, a dog. *(Beat.)* And you are so lonely. And it's not you're lonely because you don't have anyone. You're lonely because you miss yourself. And you don't really know how to talk to yourself anymore.” So, I've been kind of getting back to that.

Music: “Self Love” from the album *Let the Sun Talk* by Mavi.

Peel in my second whip

Stealing, putting secondhand kills in my residence

Healed all my brethren with a seal, we can't let you in

Medicine

I put the effort in to still burn that effigy

Odorous, I'm sober, just as lil' as they letting me

Mama, wipe your tears, I'm fighting titans, can't invite you here

Poetic license veering from the mic, my chest too tight to steer

Chess lessons, bloodletting, flood when the night is clear

I ain't give a fuck 'til my lungs had to fight for air

Glaring, staring numb, therapist had a light to spare

Snatched me by the eye, said I'ma fight whether I like or not

And she told me reasons why, but that's the private part

Burnt the midnight lighter

Killed the drive in me to tie the knot

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

Jesse Thorn: Even more still to come with MAVI. Stay with us. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

Music:

Squeezing off the E-brake

These days, I can't talk to God just for my knees' sake

Long conversations to be had

Wrong places, wrong times, and strong patience I must add

Soul weighted, don't mistake expatiations for some sadness

Strong face, a long race, I'm unafraid to come in last

Promo:

Music: Relaxed, playful guitar.

John Hodgman: Et ego sum John Hodgman.

Janet Varney: Et ego sum Janet Varney!

John: And we're the hosts of *E Pluribus Motto*, a podcast dedicated to exploring the mottos of every state in the Union.

Janet: Every episode, we will spotlight one state and discuss its official symbols—the motto, flowers, birds, beverages, songs, and even official state muffins.

John: Plus, we'll hear from guests whose lives have been inspired by the state's iconography and from residents who call that state home.

Janet: Bring some snacks, a map, and your travel journal. Because this podcast is a virtual journey like no other!

John: Audi nostrum *E Pluribus Motto*, quaeliba talia lunae du Maximum Fun!

Janet: Aaand for the Latin challenged among you and us, listen to *E Pluribus Motto* every other Monday on Maximum Fun.

(Music fades out.)

Transition: Thumpy rock music.

Jesse Thorn: Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. Hey, I want to tell you something. This week's interview and almost all of our interviews are available in video form on our YouTube page. So, if you want to see us as well as hear us—or just share the interviews easily—go to YouTube, search for *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn*. You will find us. Smash those like and subscribe buttons, as they say on YouTube. I think you're going to have a lot of fun. We're doing some fun stuff on the video there.

You can also, of course, find us—[@BullseyeWithJesseThorn](#)—on Instagram and on TikTok. So, go subscribe in those places as well. Let's get back to that conversation with MAVI.

Can I ask you a life of the party question?

MAVI: Ask it.

Jesse Thorn: One time like—I don't know, probably more than 10 years ago now, I went to downtown Los Angeles to this big loft. And it was Donald Glover's birthday party. Donald Glover, very nice guy, very talented guy. Haven't seen him since then, so I presume he still is.

(MAVI chuckles.)

He's certainly still very talented. I enjoy his acting. Anyway, I'm at Donald Glover's birthday party. I'm like, “Whoa, this is way less of a improv people I know from the Upright Citizens Brigade theatre scene, and way more of a handsome people in the music industry scene.” It was a little overwhelming, right? And me, I'm there maybe an hour. And all of a sudden, Don Glover is up on a landing in this loft, rapping. Like, this dude has a sound system, and there's a—you know, he's a very talented musician outside of rap as well. He's got—you know, he's got his little production setup there. Somebody's DJing, right?

[00:20:00]

(*Chuckling.*) And Don's just on the mic, freestyling. And I was like, "WHA?!" Like, this dude is rapping at his own birthday party?!

MAVI: Yeah, that's insane. I don't think I would ever do that.

Jesse Thorn: Yeah, so that's my question, right? Because on the one hand, this guy is charismatic and handsome, pretty good at rapping. He's pulling it off! (*Laughs.*) I bet this means that he's gonna be a movie star. You know what I mean?

MAVI: But literally, yeah—and you were correct in that. You were correct in that. (*Chuckles.*)

Jesse Thorn: Yeah, it turned out that way.

MAVI: But like to make a metaphor out of that, I realized I was rapping at my own birthday party a lot. (*Chuckles.*) You know? Like, in a place where I should be safe, I'm still performing. You know? So I had to fix—I'm fixing that about myself, actively. It's crazy.

Jesse Thorn: What do you have to do?

MAVI: Well, one of my friends told me he did this thing at his therapist's direction, right? And Jesse, I want you to really think. Before—I'm gonna ask the question, then I'm gonna say what the directive was, okay? The question is: could you do this without sobbing? So, the direct—what his therapist told him to do was to take off all of his clothes—alright?—stand in the mirror, and tell himself things that he likes about himself. (*Chuckles.*) Doesn't that sound horrifying?!

Jesse Thorn: Yeah, it's—I mean, whether I could do it without sobbing is I think probably a different question than whether I could do it without feeling like sobbing. (*Laughs.*) It probably speaks to a multilayered issue inside me, that maybe I should be sobbing when I feel like that.

MAVI: So, I'm trying to get to the point where I can do that. You know? Yeah. That feels like the SAT test of not hating yourself.

(*They laugh.*)

Jesse Thorn: But MAVI, I'm on NPR, and you went to Howard. We were good at the SAT test!

MAVI: Right? And that's the thing too. It's like—you know, I was a Gen Z kid who always was like—what's the word when like... like, made—like, exceptionalized? Is that a word? I don't know. Like, someone who was like pedestalized, right? Like, in talented and gifted classes, didn't really work all that hard in school, tested really well, went to school on full scholarship. Shortly into my college career that I was at for free at the school I wanted to go to, my mixtape got recognized by my favorite rapper in the world and sent me down this.

So, there comes a time where it's like when on paper you should be impressed by yourself, and when, by all accounts, do you have a ton to be grateful for, what will it take for MAVI to like MAVI? For MAVI to believe MAVI? Because the talent development teachers believed in you, and then Howard University believed in you, and then Earl Sweatshirt believed in you, and then millions of people believed in you. *(Beat.)* What's the problem? You know? What's the problem?

Jesse Thorn: Did the teachers always believe in you? *(Beat.)* Teachers were disappointed in me, MAVI—by and large.

MAVI: Teachers used to like have little rivalries with me in the classroom. Yeah, yeah.

Jesse Thorn: *(Laughs.)* I don't know about that one.

MAVI: Yeah, they used to do that one a lot with me, because I... 'cause like, you know when like the teacher asks a question that nobody's supposed to know the answer to, so that they can get into explaining? I would always know the answer.

(Jesse laughs.)

Like, they wouldn't—like, I would be the only one in the class with my hand raised, and they would be like, "*(Clicks teeth.)* No, anybody but MAVI." You know? I was that kid.

(Jesse laughs.)

Music: "drunk prayer" from the album *shadowbox* by MAVI.

They looking through me, you don't see me

I thought I made it out the sea, but I was dreaming

Ursa Major was the ladle, come and scoop me

My heart was banging out the cage, they caught us speeding

We hid the babies in the framing of the hoopty

I was hugged, and I was cuddled, I was smuggled

Across the puddle, thought my destiny was struggle

[00:25:00]

God had impressed on me the message, scribbled sluggish

I tried my best, repeated yells was all I mustered

Performed surgery on myself with just a cudgel

I'm more certain about my death than my construction

I pull smoke 'til I'm out of breath to try to function

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: I just interviewed Common the other day, and the single from his album is like a list of people he admires he'd like to meet in the afterlife, right? And it's very sweet, and it's only speaking positivity into the world. And you know, it's not like Common is incapable of rapping about other kinds of stuff. But like, I noticed multiple verses—I can't cite them right now, but more than one verse that you have about your flesh falling away from your bone, being left as a skeleton. *(Chuckles.)*

MAVI: Uh, yeah. *(Chuckles.)* Yeah. But... okay. My music doesn't pat itself on the butt or pat the world on the butt, but it also doesn't feel sorry for itself. And I think like that's really human. I think—like, I was talking to my mom when I was really in the throes of alcoholism, I told her, “I feel like I'm not gonna be around for a long time.” And I told her like, “I feel like I've already messed this up beyond repair. Like, things that you had already gotten right by my age, I still haven't gotten right.”

And she said—but the next day she was like, “I understand—it made me sad to hear you say that, but I understand why you said that.” Because like I kinda almost died at like almost every important developmental stage. *(Laughs.)* You know, I almost died as a baby, as a toddler, as a teenager, as a young adult. You know what I'm saying? As a teenager, multiple times. And then as a young adult, multiple times. So, I think it made me—every time, it makes me like, “What do I want to equip people I love with for the day that I'm not here?” I wake up and go to sleep with that thought on my mind every single day. And that applies to like my family, that applies to my friends, that applies to the listener, that applies to like the students and the soldiers and the poor and the pious and the hedonistic of the world. What do I want to—what do I want to equip the people who represent all these shards of myself with when I have to go?

Jesse Thorn: Do you come to an answer when you think about that question?

MAVI: *(Beat.)* No. For now... for now my political treatise can be my diary. Like, the story of Christ is the story of his life. What it became an allegory for—depending on what you think about how the Bible was written—but what it became an allegory for is a result of the events described as someone's life. At the worst case, I know that would be the truth about my life. At the best case, I figure out what this story that is being told to me through the events of my life is while I'm still alive and can impart that. But I don't know yet, and I want to know so bad.

Music: “Sense” from the album *Let the Sun Talk* by MAVI.

Breathing out of love for respiration

My dawg a jewel dropper, excavator

I'm dodging school, I'll just stress it later

Mama saw I'm full throttle pressing patience, E brake

Outgrown my knee aches

Falco, hobbled, steep gait

I'll go Halloween face, frowned up

Hound when she sing alto

I'm brown for pete's sake, crown me

I'm a mean lady lay-downer

I'm a keef saving break-downer

I'ma keep aim 'cause they got a-thousand-three ways

To scrape down our house and reframe it

FaceTime my mama pre-faded

Eighth time around, so she patient

We can't keep waiting

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: I definitely understand the feeling that—you know, as a young man, you have cast the die, and the number you got is the number you got. But I also like, in my own life—well, for one thing, I'm older than you. I'm almost 20 years older than you.

[00:30:00]

So, I've had 20 extra years to think about it. But also... when my father was my age, I was like kindergarten age. And my dad had been an alcoholic and user to the point where he would have chunks of his life where he was homeless. And I don't know how much of that time he was, you know, living rough, but definitely didn't have a place of his own. And had

made all kinds of catastrophic mistakes and poisoned himself with drinking and et cetera, et cetera. Right? But I also went to a lot of AA meetings with my dad (*chuckles*), because single parent, got to go to meetings to stay sober. There's other ways to stay sober as well, of course. But yeah, he was going to meetings to stay sober. So, I was in the back coloring, right?

I heard a lot of stories as a seven-year-old from a lot of people whose lives had hit a lot of bottoms, and a lot of people who were there engaging with that and creating a new life for themselves. And I saw in my father—you know, eventually my father remarried; I didn't have to go to the meetings with him. I could stay with my stepmom. But like I could see in my father a transformed life. And not a perfectly transformed life. You know, my dad still had heavy problems, but he stayed sober and was my dad and my brother's dad in a way that he could not have been had he not decided to like engage his life and have a different thing. You know?

MAVI: Mm. Yeah. Yeah. But... I don't know. (*Beat.*) And I think an important breakthrough for me is realizing like it's not too late until you let it be too late. You know? Like, reversing sail while you're still going forward is painful. You know? But you don't have to wait until all this entire gust of wind that's pushing you this way completely dies to decide to turn your ship in the other direction. And I think I tend to like really dichotomize like being like a drunk or a monk, you know? (*Beat.*) I'm a binge drinker or a binge not-drinker, where I'm like—it's like, I made this like systems theory chart—right?—about how addiction functions in my life. And it's gonna be like—shameless plug, it's gonna be like in the vinyl as the insert.

Jesse Thorn: So, you literally made a chart, for real.

MAVI: Yeah, I actually made a chart. I'm gonna show you the chart. But yeah, I think like I have this cycle of like having a breakthrough, having confidence in that breakthrough, and then the overconfidence in that breakthrough. Like, I just use sobriety or use the breakthrough as an excuse-making or a distraction from the thing that makes me sad in the first place. So, it's like—because—okay, so the system works like—it goes loss and then self-destruction into retribution. And the retribution either turns to control, or it turns to a breakthrough. The breakthrough turns into asceticism, which turns into—which is overcompensation, which is denial, which turns back into self-destruction, and then relapse, and then loss again. Here's the chart. (*Chuckles.*)

Jesse Thorn: We can see on the camera here the—

MAVI: Yeah. (*Laughs.*)

[00:35:00]

Jesse Thorn: You have a for real flow chart there.

MAVI: (*Laughs.*) Yeah... trying to think in systems these days.

Jesse Thorn: This is an unbelievable priority for you.

(They laugh.)

But you know what? One time my dad sat me down, and he's like, "Let's do some strategic planning. We'll start with a mind map." And my dad was an organizer, so he had a big—one of those huge pads. And you know, in his office, on top of his filing cabinet, there was a basket. And in the basket was those kind of permanent markers that graffiti writers steal. The kind with like a one-inch tip. (Laughs.) Yeah.

MAVI: Yeah, where you push it up against the wall, and all the ink drips.

Jesse Thorn: And he was—and he could—you know, he was a master of giant paper pad, giant permanent marker, draw a thing. I couldn't do it in a million years, MAVI. Not in a million, billion years.

MAVI: I didn't do it by myself; my friend Jesse Fox Hallen helped me make it. Yeah. But yeah, it was like interesting, because I think—yeah, if you think about what a system is, in terms of physics, it's like a set of forces that can self-perpetuate. You know? Either like indefinitely or will terminate after the balance between the forces ceases. So, stuff that keeps happening all the time in correlation with some other stuff that keeps happening all the time, I think it's important to draw relationships between them. For me.

Jesse Thorn: We'll finish up with MAVI after a quick break. Stay with us. It's *Bullseye* for MaximumFun.org and NPR.

Promo:

Music: Exciting, upbeat music.

Ify Nwadiwe: Since 2017, *Maximum Film* has had the same slogan.

Alonso Duralde: The podcast that's not just a bunch of straight white guys.

Drea Clark: Ooh, we've learned something over the years. Some people out there really do not like that slogan!

Ify: Listen, we love straight White guys.

Drea: Well, some of them.

Alonso: But if there's one thing we can't change, it's who we are.

Ify: I'm Ify, a comedian who was on strike last year in two different unions.

Drea: I'm Drea. I've been a producer and film festival programmer for decades.

Alonso: And I'm Alonso, a film critic who literally wrote the book on queer Hollywood.

Ify: You can listen to us talk movies and the movie biz every week on *Maximum Film*.

Alonso: We may not be straight White guys, but we love movies, and we know what we're talking about.

Drea: Listen to *Maximum Film* on Maximum Fun or wherever you listen to podcasts.

(Music ends.)

Transition: Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

Jesse Thorn: Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. I'm talking with MAVI. He's a rapper out of Charlotte, North Carolina. His beautiful new record is called *shadowbox*.

Music: "latch" from the album *shadowbox* by MAVI.

... cleanse the boredom out my system

I sit at borderline of luring corpses out my sickness

I metamorphosized and made a course up out my trenches

I let the Lord decide if I would go or not, and He sent me

I showed my mortal side, and she was mortified, I wince still

I close the door sometimes, still go to war behind my sister

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: Did you really have a 3.8 GPA in college?

MAVI: Something like that. I added some points. This is rap music.

(They laugh.)

It wasn't nothing bad though. I probably had—(*clicks teeth*) alright, I'm lying. I done failed—I failed two classes, because I ain't never go. If we ain't have none of that, I'm very close to a four, even. Like, very close.

Jesse Thorn: You gotta get those F's into incompletes. That's the only thing that got me out of college.

MAVI: Yeah, I did that for a few, but some of them like—you know, I came to college a sophomore type of deal. And like, the thing I failed was like psychology—I had a double major, biology and psychology. And I failed my psychology major freshman orientation class. Like, there was like a freshman seminar class for the psych majors. And they met like once a month, but then there was a project at the end of the semester. And I hadn't gone in like three months. And I'm like, “Okay, so half a credit class. Y'all can have it.”

Jesse Thorn: (*Chuckles.*) What's it like to go to a college where it might be that the president went to your alma mater?

MAVI: (*Sighs.*) Where'd you go to college, Jesse?

Jesse Thorn: I went to the University of California at Santa Cruz. We're not generating any presidents.

(*MAVI laughs.*)

Most of our—there's like some very successful marine biologists

[00:40:00]

MAVI: Okay! I can dig that. I think—

Jesse Thorn: Yeah. A few of the Lonely Island guys went there but didn't graduate. That kind of thing.

MAVI: I think, uh... (*sighs*) Howard University has always functioned as a place for Black professionals to send their children to become Black professionals, or that the Black elite send their children to, to meet the other maintained network—you know, in service to that elite status. I was not that, so I always felt a little left out. You know... like kids were going to the club and getting sections, I think our freshman year at college. You know, I couldn't like do that. Going to brunch and—you know, I got the Pick Two for \$2.50 McChicken four-piece nugget with the water cup. You know what I'm saying?

So, it was kind of isolating and kind of telling, because I never really understood that Black people in America like be rich—like, in numbers like that. But yeah, it was an illuminating and isolating experience in some different—in parts. You know. Because like, you know, we did the big protests and stuff that had very far left leanings. And it didn't really even land on me until like after I left school, where it's like, “Omavi, that school was never—that school

doesn't function—it's a private—” You know what I'm saying? It's a private college. It doesn't function for any egalitarian aim, you know?

Jesse Thorn: Or that it is both, maybe. I mean like I think there's some egalitarianism in it, right? It can both enable and support, you know, quote/unquote “Black excellence”, but also gatekeep it.

MAVI: Right. And that's kind of the thing. I don't really know how I feel about Black excellence. (*Beat.*) I don't like exceptionalism in like almost any form. And while Black excellence feels like we're raising the floor by like acknowledging the height of the ceiling, that's just trickle-down respectability politics. You know? Like, where's the—? And it contributes to poor Black leadership, because Black people collectivize our successes. And from the outside culture, like White mainstream culture, we collectivize our failures. So, we're encouraged to collectivize our successes.

But like, for example, all I could contribute for my entire life to the Black community could be inspiration. And I could be a billionaire, and a lot of Black people would be really happy with that by itself. Which is like a little pathetic to me for a people who are like in such an important crossroads position politically, economically, et cetera, right now. And like, so to that point—like... obviously, I'm a big fan of Jay-Z. I'm a big fan of hip-hop. Like... it's really cool for Jay-Z that he like did business with Ace of Spades. But like for the ordinary Black child, that might not have done anything, or as much as if he's like doing whatever he does on the ground for Black children, specifically. You know what I'm saying? But we actually celebrate the Ace of Spades deal and are proud of that more than we like point the spotlight on like real, on-the-ground change in less glitzy ways. Like, really—like, I'm sure he's paying a lot of people's rent, and that's a lot more exciting to me than like a big brand sponsorship.

[00:45:00]

You know?

Jesse Thorn: I mean, I'll say this, MAVI. My feeling about it—you can correct me if I'm wrong—is that your opposition to exceptionalism might be—I'm not discounting any of the systemic stuff you were just talking about, but it might also be some like trauma of the gifted child stuff.

MAVI: It is! But what I'm saying is like... like, man! (*Sighs.*)

Jesse Thorn: Because like when you're a gifted kid, exceptionalism stinks. It's only burden. Because you can only—like, you can only be this thing that was already set up, or a failure. (*Laughs.*)

MAVI: Right! And I think like—I don't know. I think representation, it matters a lot, and it's helpful a lot. Because there are so many things that people haven't seen people who look like them do, still in the year 2024. Absolutely. But I worry about this like... first, success and failure in any community—and especially now with the Black community—it's not super

bimodal. Like, we have a big lump in the like standard deviation chart looking thing on this side, and we have like a few crazy cool spikes over here on the far successful end. So, I worry that like as the forces of society squish the majority of people into preordained spots, how do we find pride in individuals who don't qualify for our exceptionalism? You know?

Because ultimately, they are the base for the exceptionalism itself. Like, yes, MAVI is a gifted child, but one thing different about MAVI is like... like, dude, my mom—my dad put me through college. I was like 14. My grandmother, one of my grandmothers went to high school and dropped out, because she was having my dad and—or graduated and didn't continue. And then one of my grandmothers stopped going to school in like the sixth grade.

So, what I'm saying is like, it's not just like, “Oh, don't call me ‘special’, because that makes me feel weird.” But don't call me special when I know you wouldn't call anybody who makes me special “special”. And that it's not a defense of my own ego and insecurities or like unwillingness to rise to the occasion. Because I still like work to a standard and work to like push the boundaries of like how good I can be, how excellent I actually can be.

However, I want to measure excellence by the metrics that actually matter to me in my life. And by my metrics, my grandmother, my great grandmother, my great grandfather, these are excellent people. And by a lot of other people metrics, these are poor Black people from the country. And I don't know if I can get jiggy with that. Honestly, Jess.

Jesse Thorn: Well, MAVI, we're out of time. So, I'm going to thank you for ending our interview with an answer that included both getting jiggy with it and bimodality.

MAVI: (*Chuckles.*) I loved chatting with you.

Jesse Thorn: We're talking about rap music, here on National Public Radio. MAVI, thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me. And it was great to see you. I hope we'll see you again.

MAVI: Of course, and many, many more, Jesse.

Music: “2000 leagues” from the album *shadowbox* by MAVI.

I will always answer when you call

I will guide us dancing in the fog

I will hold my hands up when you fall

I will be a chance for you to soften

I won't let you drown

I won't let you sink

(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. My producer, Richard, tells me they've just been pounding away construction-wise immediately outside of his apartment for two weeks, and it finally stopped today. So, that's good.

[00:50:00]

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. Our interstitial music comes to us from our pal Dan Wally, also known as DJW. You can find his music at DJWSounds.bandcamp.com, where you can download music from this show. And I think it's pay what you want, so DJWSounds.bandcamp.com. Special thanks to the crew at Kickstart Studios for recording our conversation with Nicolay.

And by the way, our theme music, written and recorded by The Go! Team. It's called "Huddle Formation". Our thanks to the band, our thanks to Memphis Industries, their label. I actually saw a post on Reddit this week about The Go! Team where somebody was saying, "I always thought that was a joke band that Jesse made up. This album is cool." Yeah, it's a great album. They're a great band! *(Chuckling.)* They gave it to us for free! Go listen to their records. They're worth it. They're awesome.

You can follow *Bullseye* on Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, where you will find video from just about all our interviews, including the ones that you heard this week. 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:

You can make plans

Or you can just leave

I will always answer

(Song ends.)