

[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. Time now for a segment called “The Song That Changed My Life”. On deck, we have Nicolay. He's best known as the production half of the group The Foreign Exchange, alongside our old friend Phonte. They formed in 2002 in what I think is fair to call the most 2002 manner possible. They met on a message board. Nicolay, who lived in Norway, met rapper Phonte on the hip hop website OKPlayer. Phonte lived in North Carolina and also performed in the hip hop group Little Brother. Nicolay and Phonte eventually recorded and exchanged tracks across the Atlantic Ocean. That's why the album was called *The Foreign Exchange*.

These days, that isn't a particularly novel way to make music. But in 2002, it was a big deal. And the two of them were an incredible fit.

Music: “Nic’s Groove” from the album *Connected* by The Foreign Exchange.

We just want to chill and let you party

Just us, just run, I know you probably

Don't know, don't mind the way we move you

I think I'll start, just let our music groove you

I'm more than beats, I'm more than rhymes

Please know I'm not your everyday find

J-League's on a mission to shine and get some sunlight

And get our one's right, and keep our fam tight

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: The Foreign Exchange is more than just a beatmaker and a rapper. Their albums span funk, R&B, hip-hop, and pop.

Music: "Daykeeper" from the album *Leave it All Behind* by The Foreign Exchange.

I can't sleep at night

'Cause they won't see me

Running from the daylight

To where she keeps me

And when the sun rises, she watches over me

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: It's been over two decades since The Foreign Exchange began, seven years since their first album. And they just dropped a new single, called "The Grey".

Music: "The Grey" by The Foreign Exchange.

They can never do 'Te wrong

In the booth with my screw face on

I stay tucked like a shoelace on

A fresh pair of brand-new Tretorns

I can spit it like a bluejay on

The track I sing it like a Bubl  for 'em

I'm nuts, I go acorns

When I chef, I go Raekwon

God blessed me with the best of life

But I still look at my sons and see two Trayvons

Been waiting and debating like a Cool J song

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: Nicolay's also been working on solo music. He just released an album called *Terra Firma*. It includes features from Phonte and past *Bullseye* guest Sy Smith, among others. When we asked Nicolay about the song that changed his life, he picked a great one. Maybe one of the greatest ever? I mean, definitely one of my favorite ever. Honestly, I'm surprised it took this long for somebody to pick it. Here's Nicolay.

Nicolay: My name is Nicolay, I'm the producer for The Foreign Exchange, and I chose the song "If I Was Your Girlfriend" by Prince from his 1987 album *Sign O' the Times*. I do distinctly remember the first time hearing it. Really, a long story short, Prince is for me sort of the genesis of my own music making. Before that, I had largely enjoyed music from my parents' record collection. And Prince, circa '84, '85, really became my first—the first artist that I liked.

Music: "Purple Rain" from the album *Purple Rain* by Prince and the Revolution.

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

Nicolay: Prince, at that time in the Netherlands, was kind of known for a very incendiary show in '81, where he was still in his bikini brief days. And the first song that I remember really getting exposed to was "Purple Rain", for obvious reasons. That video was on TV all the time.

Music:

I only wanted one time to see you laughing

I only want to see you laughing

In the purple rain

(Music fades out.)

Nicolay: I don't know that it grabbed me in a particular way, but the next year with *Parade*, I really liked "Kiss", and I really liked "Girls and Boys".

Music: "Sign O' the Times" from the album *Sign O' the Times* by Prince.

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

Nicolay: But it was the *Sign O' the Times* album. It dropped in '87; I was 13. That sort of blew my mind wide open for a number of reasons. One, musically, it was absolutely next level to me.

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Music:

In France, a skinny man died of a big disease with a little name

By chance his girlfriend came across a needle and soon she did the same

(Music fades out.)

Nicolay: I didn't really know Prince as Prince and the Revolution. So, for me, I kind of learned about Prince as this one-man band who produced everything, who played everything; sang, danced, had impeccable style, had all these women around him, but still had this kind of androgynous—if you will—style. And as a 13-year-old, I was really, really fascinated by what that meant.

Music: “If I Was Your Girlfriend” from the album *Sign O’ the Times* by Prince.

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

Nicolay: And the song “If I Was Your Girlfriend” specifically absolutely floored me because of the subject matter. And it really was the first time that I heard a song where somebody was vulnerable and really expressed sentiments that, as a teenager, I didn't know that you could put in song.

Music:

If I was your girlfriend

Would you remember

Would you tell me all of the things you forgot

When I was your man?

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

Nicolay: It felt very honest; it felt very raw, very vulnerable, also incredibly sexy.

Music:

If I was your best friend

Would you let me take care of you?

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

Nicolay: At that point, he—I think—was still using the LinnDrum, so it had that sort of programmed beat. It has a really, really funky slap bass line that I tend to gravitate towards.

But then it has this sort of almost esoteric lead line that is like a backwards kind of harmonica sort of sound.

And the first time I heard it, I was just like, “What the hell is this?!”

Music:

If I was your girlfriend

Would you let me dress you?

I mean, help you pick out your clothes

Before we go out

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

Nicolay: It somehow felt perfect for where I was in my life. When he said, “Will you let me dress you? I mean, help you pick out the clothes before we go out,” that's something that I couldn't imagine me saying to a girl. You know, such bravery. Like, how is this man so comfortable in his skin that he can put himself in a position where he wishes that he was his lover's girlfriend?

Music:

If I was your girlfriend

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

Nicolay: That entire song is filled with lines that absolutely blow your mind. There's an elegance there, there's a simplicity to it. But it's pure, raw, soul-bearing stuff. And it clearly was a man consumed by love, I think.

Music:

Or then, could we just hang out? I mean

Could we go to a movie and cry together?

'Cause to me, baby, that would be so fine

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

Nicolay: I really, really like the Camille voice that he introduced on *Sign O' the Times*, and particularly on this song. It was a Camille song.

Music:

I mean, help you pick out your clothes before we go out

Listen, girl

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

Nicolay: The Camille voice is basically his voice pitched up, which now with plug ins and laptops it's very easy. But at the time involved him to slow down the master tape in the studio, and then record his normal voice, and then if you play the song back, the voice becomes pitched up.

Music:

All of the things you are to me

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

Nicolay: I think it makes it more ambiguous. Like, who is singing this? You know, and I think maybe—I've often wondered if he did that to create distance between himself and the song. But later I kind of questioned that, because there were more straightforward songs that he did in this voice. Like, I think "Housequake" is a Camille song,

Music: "Housequake" from the album *Sign O' the Times* by Prince.

Shut up already, damn!

Tell me, who in this house know about the Quake?

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

Nicolay: Which for all intents and purposes is a relatively straight-up funk song.

Music:

...say, "Yeah" (Yeah!)

If you know how to party, say, "Oh, yeah" (Oh, yeah!)

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

Nicolay: But I think it may have been to create some distance, certainly some ambiguity to who did it.

Music:

Housequake, everybody jump up and down

Housequake, there's a brand-new groove going 'round

(Music fades out.)

Nicolay: So, the album came out—

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I want to say it was maybe April or May. And so, I got the album through my buddy, and I heard it for the first time in my bedroom.

(Cassette tape sounds.)

Rewound it a number of times—hundreds, if not more.

Music: “If I Was Your Girlfriend”

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

Nicolay: And “If I Was Your Girlfriend”—the entire album, but that song I would never be able to get past.

And then, in the summer of '87, Prince went on tour. And for reasons that are still kind of unknown to many, he chose to do his shows in Holland in a soccer stadium that is about a few hundred yards from my parents' house, the house that I grew up in. One particular memory I have is that he would soundcheck late at night, and so I remember distinctly lying in my bed; I don't know if I was asleep or awake, but he sound checked “If I Was Your Girlfriend”, and I could hear it.

Music:

If I was your best friend

Would you let me take care of you

And do all the things that only a best friend can? Oh

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

Nicolay: Even though I wasn't there in the stadium, that made such a huge impression on me, hearing it through the windows, kind of hearing it sort of waft into my direction on the wind. I'll never forget how that felt.

Music:

If I was your girlfriend

If I was your girlfriend

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

Nicolay: Looking back, that entire time informed everything about my own music making, about my own artistry, about the choices that I made—certainly to become a music producer. Because that was clear at that point, that Prince was his own producer, that he kind of was a one-man band in many ways. And certainly for that album, that was true.

Music:

... if somebody hurt you

Even if that somebody was me

Sometimes, I trip on how happy

We could be, please

(Music fades out.)

Nicolay: I had a best friend in high school. He was a year older than me—well, he was a class one year ahead from me—who probably was the biggest Prince fan in the Netherlands at the time. He was a guitar player. He had a pink guitar that was kind of an homage to Jesse Johnson from the time. And he had every Prince album. And he had bootlegs, he had live shows. And so, him and I became fast friends, and we even formed a little cover band. And we would learn songs from *Sign O' the Times*, specifically. That was kind of the album that at that point seemed to be everywhere. So, we learned songs like “U Got the Look”.

Music: “U Got the Look” from the album *Sign O' the Times* by Prince.

You got that look

(Music fades out.)

Nicolay: “I Could Never Take the Place of Your Man”.

Music: “I Could Never Take the Place of Your Man” from the album *Sign O’ the Times* by Prince.

And I could never take the place of your man

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

Nicolay: We learned a few others—admittedly all poorly, more than likely. But we really, really loved that album, and we loved every song on that album for various reasons. And I really credit being exposed to Prince at that age to the entirety of my career. And there’s songs from Prince in any of his eras that I could point at that really meant something to me the moment that I heard them. But “If I Was Your Girlfriend”, to me, I think I was changed in every way.

Music: “If I Was Your Girlfriend”.

Not that you’re helpless

But sometimes, sometimes those are the things

That being in love’s about

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

Nicolay: Both in terms of as a person—as I think a human—but very much as a musician. I really think that was sort of the nucleus moment of me as somebody who decided that that’s what I wanted to do. I wanted to touch people’s lives the way that he had touched mine.

Music:

PLE-E-E-EASE!

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

Nicolay: And I really credit being exposed to Prince at that age to the entirety of my career.

Music:

If I was your girlfriend

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

Nicolay: A lot of artists over time have had a profound impact on me, some more than others. I think Prince was really, literally the artist that sort of helped me grow up. And he showed

people a way to live life. And you know, people that are sort of off the beaten path for a number of reasons were—

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—I think forever changed by the fact that they were exposed to his music and lyrics. And that was something that I understood at the time and really wanted to see if I could have a tiny little bit of a fraction of an effect like that on other people.

Music:

That being in love's about

(Sugar, sugar)

Sugar, do you know what I'm saying to you this evening?

(If I was your girlfriend)

Maybe you think I'm being a little self-centered

But I, I said I want to be

(Sugar, sugar)

All of the things you are to me

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: Nicolay, on the song that changed his life, “If I Was Your Girlfriend” by Prince. Let's go out with one more song from his group, The Foreign Exchange. This one's from their first record. It's called “All That You Are”.

Music: “All That You Are” from the album *Connected* by The Foreign Exchange.

I want you to feel me baby

I want you to understand me baby

This is it, yo

This is it, yo, for real

I see it happening man

It's about to go down

For all of us (for real)

I see you swinging, I see you nodding to it

It's about to go down for us, word up man

We almost home

We almost at the finish line

It feel good, don't it? Oh!

And it's over!

I can go home and chill

(Feel it, yo)

It's a long process from bar 1 to bar 16 and

Writing in my notebook from morn' to evening

(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.

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.

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(Music ends.)