

[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. Now, I don't know this for sure, but I am willing to bet that Paul Williams—my guest this week—goes to a lot of parties. And when he goes to those parties in Malibu or Calabasas or Joshua Tree or whatever, he has a soda in his hand, and he just—I mean, he just captivates every single person in the room. Part of that is because Paul honestly looks like the most interesting guy at a party.

He's 84, but he could pass for 60. He's got messy reddish-brown hair, a giant pair of tinted round glasses, and a listed height of 5'2". But he doesn't just look interesting, he has also lived an extraordinary life. First and foremost, he is a songwriter. He has written songs performed by David Bowie, Tiny Tim, The Carpenters, and Three Dog Night.

Music: “Old Fashioned Love Song” from the album *Harmony* by Three Dog Night.

Just an old-fashioned love song

Playing on the radio

And wrapped around the music

Is the sound of someone promising they'll never go

You swear you've heard it before

As it slowly rambles on

No need in bringing 'em back

'Cause they're never really gone

Just an old-fashioned love song

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: And he also—this might be how you know him best—co-wrote one of the greatest *Muppet* songs of all time. Tiny Tim, “Rainbow Connection”, from the *Muppet Movie*.

Music: “Rainbow Connection” from *The Muppet Movie*.

Who said that every wish would be heard and answered

When wished on the morning star?

Somebody thought of that, and someone believed it

Look what it's done so far

What's so amazing that keeps us stargazing?

And what do we think we might see?

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: What else? Well, looking at my notes, he went on *Johnny Carson* 50 times—including once in full orangutan makeup. We'll get into that, I promise. He also starred in and co-scored the cult classic *Phantom of the Paradise*.

Paul Williams: “Faust” from the album *Phantom of the Paradise (Official Motion Picture Soundtrack)* by William Finley.

Out of place as a crying clown

Who could only frown

And the play went on for hours

And as I lived my role

I swore I'd sell my soul

For one love who would stand by me

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: And incidentally, he has skydived over 100 times. *(Chuckles.)*

Now, usually when we interview a guest on *Bullseye*, it's because they have something to promote—a book or a movie or an album or whatever. This time, that is not the case. We basically just found a phone number, called Paul Williams, told him we thought he was cool. And then he got in a car and drove almost 50 miles to come talk to me. What a guy. Let's get into it with the great Paul Williams.

Transition: Upbeat synth with light vocalizations.

Jesse Thorn: Paul Williams, welcome to *Bullseye*. I'm so happy to have you on the show. Thanks for making the drive.

Paul Williams: It's great. I'm sorry that we had such a great conversation before we started recording.

Jesse Thorn: We were rolling tape. People are going to get to hear. That's the bonus content.

Paul Williams: Yeah. You know, you can splice it in later in the show, when I get boring. Yeah.

Jesse Thorn: Okay, so my first question is what is a sport parachutist? Because I read several places (*uncertainly*) what I believe to be a true fact that you were a sport parachutist.

Paul Williams: And you know, when I graduated from high school in 1958, I went to live with my mother and my little brother in Denver for a while. And then I moved to Albuquerque. And in Albuquerque, I worked at a title insurance company. And inside I still felt like there needed to be something special about me. I mean, I felt special, and I didn't want to just take photographs of quitclaim deeds for a living.

And one of the guys I met at the title insurance company was a former paratrooper, and he was involved in sport parachuting. It was the absolute—1960 was the absolute beginnings of the sport. So, I wanted—I said, “I want to do that!” You know.

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I made 33 jumps. My first jumps were with the old military T10 parachutes, and we would cut them up and do double goers in the back, so you could steer them. And it was the very beginnings of skydiving as a sport.

Jesse Thorn: So, when you say you knew that you wanted something special, did you believe jumping out of an airplane might be that thing? Or were you already desperate to be an actor and just trying to figure out how you could do something like that?

Paul Williams: Yeah, I was—you know, I had been one of those kids that sings “Danny Boy” in the middle of the night. My dad was an alcoholic who died when I was 13 in a car wreck. My dad was a very sweet, loving man, and we moved all the time because he was in construction,

Jesse Thorn: Was the wreck related to its alcoholism?

Paul Williams: Yeah, absolutely, and it was right before his 60th birthday. And he died a week after the accident. Nobody else was hurt, but he was loaded. And when he died—I mean, he would get me up as a kid to sing for his friend. He had a friend named Ike McShane that he drank with all the time, and he was a fellow construction worker. I mean, so we'd go from town to town, and Ike would always be there. And Ike would be with my dad, sitting in the living room. And he would get me up to sing for Ike McShane, who hated me.

Jesse Thorn: So, when you moved to Los Angeles, you had spent your teenage years in Southern California with an aunt—right?—after your father died.

Paul Williams: Yeah, my aunt. Exactly, my aunt. And it's interesting, because I was tiny. You know? And so, I arrived when I was 13 for two weeks with her. She essentially told me that if you go back and live with your mother and your little brother, your little brother's gonna starve, because she can't afford you both.

Jesse Thorn: When you say you were tiny, you were both young and you're a really small guy. So, you must have been small then.

Paul Williams: (*Overlapping.*) I was young. You know, like at six or seven, my dad would say things like, “Should he still be running under coffee tables?” (*Chuckles.*) It was like—I was very, very small, and I had two brothers that are both six footers. They're both gone by now. They both passed. But I was—maybe I was like, I think nine years old. We were living in Albuquerque. And they finally took me to a doctor. And a country doctor in Albuquerque, New Mexico at the time, said, “I can make this kid grow. I'm going to give him male hormone.”

So, they pumped me full of male hormone, which had an interesting effect. It was quite the opposite, because it kicked me into puberty, which closes off the bones. And they, you know, stop growing. But what happened to me is all of a sudden, you know, I'm like nine years old and experiencing the urges that come with early puberty. And it's like I keep asking little girls to go in the closet with me and kiss like they do in the movies. (*Chuckling.*) Which my family notices, and this is a—this is the headwaters of me writing the kind of love songs, which I call basically codependent anthems, is that here I am: this little guy, you know, that is feeling this stuff that is totally inappropriate to the age. They stop the shots, which stops the puberty, and puts me in a situation where my body clock is moving really slowly.

So, I didn't really hit actual puberty until I was like probably 21/22.

Jesse Thorn: We're gonna go for a minute. When we come back, we will talk with Paul Williams about the time he appeared on *Johnny Carson*, dressed head to toe as an orangutan from *Planet of the Apes*. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

Promo:

Music: Relaxed, lo-fi synth.

Brea Grant: Oh darling, why won't you accept my love?

Mallory O'Meara: My dear, even though you are a duke, I could never love you. You... you... borrowed a book from me and never returned it!

Brea: (*Gasp!*) Save yourself from this terrible fate by listening to Reading Glasses.

Mallory: We'll help you get those borrowed books back and solve all your other reader problems.

Brea: Reading Glasses, every Thursday on Maximum Fun.

(*Music fades out.*)

Transition: Thumpy rock music.

Jesse Thorn: Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. I'm talking with Paul Williams. He's a songwriter who has written dozens of hits, including "Rainbow Connection" from the *Muppet Movie*. He's also an actor and TV personality who appeared on *Johnny Carson's Tonight Show* 50 times. He's also 84 years old and extremely handsome. More handsome than me? Well, you be the judge on our YouTube page where we have video from this and every other new interview on *Bullseye*. Just search for *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* on YouTube and marvel at the sights and sounds. And you know, smash those like and subscribe buttons, as they say.

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Okay, let's get back into my conversation with Paul Williams.

When you moved to Los Angeles to become an actor, was your first career as an actor playing kids?

Paul Williams: You should watch a movie called *The Loved One* with Jonathan Winters, Sir John Gielgud, Robert Morris, Anjanette Comer. It was directed by Tony Richardson. I played a 13-year-old. I was, I think, 22. And I looked like a 13-year-old and sounded like one. You know, (*pitching his voice up*) "It's not a bomb. It's a 70-centimeter projectile launching at approximately—" It's a really interesting, funny movie. And it was a good role.

I had done a play in Long Beach at the Magnolia Theater and got really good reviews in LA. The *LA Examiner*—now long gone, sadly—said that I had the rare gift of seeming spontaneous in the theatre. And I grabbed that review, went racing up and reconnected with an agent that I'd had briefly when I was in high school. The only job I didn't get that was a gift, I also—Stephen Stills and I both auditioned for the Monkees years later and were

rejected. Which was a gift, because they had other great Monkees, too. You know, I didn't get to be a monkey until *Battle for the Planet of the Apes*, one more time.

Jesse Thorn: But like being an actor who's an adult who plays kids and teenagers is a job that has an expiration date attached to it, especially if you're living hard as you were. It's like at some point, even if you're physically small, you don't look bright-eyed and bushy-tailed the way a child does.

Paul Williams: No, no, (*inaudible*) I don't have—(*stammering*) you know, at the auditions, you know, there are little kid actors looking at me going, “Mommy, that boy has funny eyes.” (*Laughing.*) You know, it's like that boy's probably hungover is what the truth was. And you know, it took—it was like two years before I got another decent acting job. I mean, I did some stage stuff and a lot of local summer stock and that sort of thing.

But I was cast in a movie called *The Chase*, which was a big, big production of Marlon Brando, Robert Redford, Jane Fonda. And I shared a dressing room with a kid named Marc Seaton. He was the son of the director, George Seaton, and quite wealthy and had a beautiful Martin guitar. And we were in a tiny little dressing room, and I picked it up and he said, “Don't touch that guitar! It's a Martin.”

And I went, “I didn't know they had names.”

And he said, “No, that's the make.” You know.

At any rate, I was fascinated with it, and I think there's some little piece of a connectedness from almost my infancy of loving *The Great American Songbook* or whatever.

Jesse Thorn: Had you played music or sung in the intervening time?

Paul Williams: No. No, not at all. I had done one little thing where I helped a photographer take pictures of a band in Orange County, called The Chancellors. And the night before I went to help him, I just—without even thinking about it, I wrote two songs. (*Chuckles.*) I mean, it's really two terrible, '50s-sounding—one called “Summertime Love”. And their manager actually published those two songs and cut a .45 with me singing it.

Music: “Summertime Love” by Paul Williams and the Chancellors.

June is the magic month for me

School is ended, and we'll all be free

To go to the beach and lie in the sun

To go to the mountains, and we'll all have fun

And they'll be, for me, a summertime love

(Music fades out.)

Paul Williams: But by the time that—I mean, nothing happened with it, and I was off, and I got an acting job, and I had no intention to write songs. But when I was on *The Chase*, I was sitting on the steps outside our little motorhome. We're shooting at night, and I'm shooting this junkyard scene where the junkyard's on fire, us kids have set it on fire. And just amusing myself—I was watching them shoot one scene after another with Bubba, which was Robert Redford, and the sheriff, which was Marlon Brando. And I just, for my own amusement, went, *(singing)* “Bubba, Bubba, Bubba, come out wherever you are, or we're gonna come in and get you. Yes, we're gonna come in and get you.”

And Robert Duvall was walking by, and he went, “Wow, what is that?”

And I said, “It's a guitar. I just bought it.”

He went, “Not the guitar, what were you singing?”

And I said, “I just made it up.”

And he said, “Come with me.” And he walked me over to the director, but he said, “Show him.”

I said, “It's the guitar I just bought.”

He said, “Not—! Not the guitar, show him the song.”

And I sang “Bubba, Bub” and he shot it. He, you know, lit up all the—the gas pipes of gas in the junkyard were fired up, and he stood me next to the barbed wire fence, and we shot it.

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He put me in the back of a little '32 Roadster, and I sang it there, and it's in the movie. It's a classic case of the universe went, “Uh-uh-uh-uh. You're not gonna do it as an actor, but this is what you need to pay attention to.” And two years later, I actually started writing songs.

Jesse Thorn: I mean, you had this career of, you know, wanting to be a performer, but wanting to be a performer as someone else. You know, wanting to be an actor, wanting to do anything to get out of your own identity.

Paul Williams: I think, you know, a little bit of therapy shed a lot of light on that. You know, I mean, I was like—at three years old, my mother turned around, and I was missing in a department store. And then she went looking for me, and I was standing on a counter singing. I told somebody, “I can sing,” and they set me up on the—

So, there was something in just—*(chuckling)* I don't know if it was a past life or what, but there's something in me that was just born to show off by some singing!

Jesse Thorn: I mean, the thing about the kind of songwriting that you did, especially at that point in your career—but also through writing songs for movies in particular, which you've done throughout your career—is that it is the same kind of character work or ventriloquism that the acting was, right? Like, this was a time—the late 1960s and through the 1970s—when first-person songwriting was so central to making music. You know, everybody's trying to be the next Bob Dylan or rock and roll equivalent. And you're writing, you know, Brill Building songs. And you're writing songs for other people's voices. You know?

(Paul chuckles.)

You're writing songs about abstract ideas of—you know, rather than songs about your own direct experience.

Paul Williams: Well, it was—you know, I showed up at A&M—you know, I get this call from A&M Records, and Biff Rose had been in. And there were a couple songs that we'd co-written that they liked. One of them became the first song I ever had recorded. So, anyway, I go down, and I meet these guys. And when I meet a guy named Chuck Kaye, who's the head of publishing there, and he introduces me to Roger Nichols. Roger Nichols is a composer assigned to A&M Records. He's also an artist there. And they're looking for a lyricist for him.

And Roger gives me a cassette of a melody. He says, “If you like it, you know, let me know. Maybe you'd like to write some words to this.” And I showed up the next morning, like 9/10 o'clock, with the words done. You know? I just—I hear words in music, other people's music. I hear words in fountains. It's weird. *(Chuckling.)* We have a fountain in the little courtyard of my place in Huntington Beach. And it's just—the sound of the water actually makes the same sounds as—

Anyway, so there's proof of something. Maybe I'm on the spectrum, who knows? But one of the songs was “Fill Your Heart”, which was recorded by Tiny Tim.

Music: “Fill Your Heart” from the album *God Bless Tiny Tim* by Tiny Tim.

Fill your heart with love today, don't play the game of time

Things that happened in the past, happened in your mind

In your mind, only in your mind, in your mind

Forget your mind, and you'll be free

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: “Fill Your Heart”, which is one of those first songs that you wrote, was not just— Like, I think it is both the beginning and the apotheosis of Paul Williamsness, in that it was recorded by Tiny Tim as the B-side of “Tiptoe Through the Tulips”.

Paul Williams: (*Imitating the undulating falsetto of “Tiptoe Through the Tulips”.*) “Oh, tiptoe!” Yep. Yep.

Jesse Thorn: And by David Bowie on “Hunky Dory”.

Paul Williams: You know, that just—it says so much about the gifts of my life, just to hear you say it. And it touches me. Because you know, I remember loving the fact that we were getting the B-side of a Tiny Tim record, but also going—you know, I was a solid little hippie, and there was this whole thing happening over in Laurel Canyon; with Crosby, Stills & Nash; and Joni Mitchell; and Jackson Brown; and JD Souther. And I was over here, you know, writing for the Carpenters and Three Dog Night and starting out with Tiny Tim.

But Biff Rose was responsible for, you know, a couple big gifts in my life—taking me to A&M Records, which was the most remarkable little independent record company, where the artist was revered and given the freedom to do what he wanted to do, but lightly directed by just an amazing bunch of really talented producers and publishers.

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And I will remain forever grateful.

Jesse Thorn: What was it like for you to be pushing so hard to be an outrageous cool guy while also being, you know, like absurd. Like, you look at the time is absurd. It's fantastic, but it's ridiculous as well.

(*Paul agrees.*)

And also, being in this part of showbusiness that was like the most normal part of showbusiness you could—which is like showing up to an office, working all day, you know, scribbling notes at a piano or whatever. Like, just a true, classic job of showbusiness.

Paul Williams: Writing songs. Writing songs every day. A lyricist. And the whole thing was—you know, the first thing that Roger gave me, I wrote that night. I did the same thing with another melody that Chuck Kaye gave me. And so, I would write with Roger. And Chuck was like, “Write with Roger. That's your future; that's amazing.”

And Roger would go home to his family, and I would sit there. And anybody that walked by my door, I would grab him and say, “You want to write?” I would write by myself, and then I'd write with—you know, Jack Conrad, a bass player I worked with, we wrote “Family Man”. And Chuck was like, “Write by yourself and write with Roger.” But then I wrote a couple other things, and he went, “You know what? Just write.”

Jesse Thorn: How did you keep it together enough, given the amount of loaded and/or high you were at various times, to do regular job work with—you know, these are still showbusiness people, but...

Paul Williams: Yeah, yeah. Well, you know. First of all, it was the '60s and the '70s. And so, cocaine was not addictive at that point. It turns out that I was, though. But you know, it's a progressive disease. The fact is, in—you know, my out-of-control, real—just incapable of delivering, really—I mean, was something that I—you know, it was an arrogance and an irresponsibility that I grew into.

You know, I didn't—you know, I loved what I did. I had a lot of confidence and loved every opportunity. And when I started recording, which was—you know, first I did the *Someday Man* album, which was really Roger's album. I mean, it was all songs we wrote together. But when I did the *Old Fashioned Love Song* album for A&M, it was the beginnings of my recording career as well.

So, I started doing television. I started doing concerts. And I just—you know, I became addicted to the camera being on me. I mean, I loved going—hanging out with Pat McCormick, who was writing the monologues for John and *The Tonight Show*. So, I'd be over—I did 48 *Tonight Shows*. I remember six. But I was also just hanging over there. You know, I'd go do *Hollywood Squares*, then go over and hang out with Pat. That's how we wound up in *Smokey the Bandit*. Burt Reynolds was sitting there as a guest, and he looks at the two of us. And I had worked with Burt. I'd written some stuff for him. And he looked at the two of us and he went, "I got an idea." Then we did *Smokey the Bandit* 1, 2, and (inaudible).

Jesse Thorn: Can I ask you about *Tonight Show*—you said you remember about half dozen of the dozens of times that you were on *The Tonight Show*. You were the perpetrator of one of the most famous, legendary late-night television guest appearances ever I think. Which is the time that you went on *The Tonight Show* in full *Battle for the Planet of the Apes* regalia.

Paul Williams: Virgil, the Orangutan.

Jesse Thorn: Yeah, as an orangutan sang a touching ballad, and then sat down and—while somehow smoking a cigarette through your weird *Planet of the Apes* makeup—like, did panel with Johnny Carson and Ed McMahon. (Laughs.)

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Clip:

Paul Williams: I'm doing a picture called *The Battle for the Planet of the Apes*.

Johnny Carson: That's true.

Paul Williams: And I was set to do the show tonight, and we ran late. So, I came right from the studio. It's a wonderful story. It's about a young violinist who's a concert violinist.

(Scattered giggles from the audience.)

He's brilliant. And he breaks all of his fingers while putting the fender skirts on his '49 Buick.

(*Laughter.*)

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Paul Williams: Well, you know, with that makeup on, anything that got to you had to be with the mouthpiece on—which is like two inches out in front of your actual mouth. Anything you get to you is going to come in through a straw, which worked out with my diet at the time. Liquid, and otherwise.

[00:25:00]

Jesse Thorn: (*Giggling.*) You said in that appearance that it was all banana daiquiris.

Paul Williams: Exactly. He said, “This is for a movie, isn't it?”

I said, “No, this is seven months of nothing but banana daiquiris.”

And you know, the great thing about doing *The Tonight Show* with Johnny is, first of all, we never talked until we were on camera. I mean, if he came in to do makeup, he had his own little makeup room. He might have waved to us, but he wouldn't even say hi. We would just save it. So, when we sat down, it was legitimate.

Jesse Thorn: Okay, so by that point in your career, you could be enjoying your life as a bestselling songwriter, right? Like, you have written, by then, huge hits. I mean, huge hits for the Carpenters. You know, you were the musical director of *A Star is Born*, writing songs with and for Barbra Streisand.

(*Paul says something indistinct.*)

Yeah. So, you have what lifestyle gurus call passive income at that point. You've got publishing on monster hit songs. That could have been your life. So, why were you then still putting on crazy eyeglasses, and going on *The Tonight Show*, and putting on what I'm sure must have been incredibly arduous to put on *Planet of the Apes* makeup to be in a *Planet of the Apes* movie? You know what I mean?

Paul Williams: Well, yeah. Well, no, the fact is that it was the beginnings of my success, and I was cast as an actor in the *Apes* movie.

Jesse Thorn: So, you were just straight up—you just went and—did you audition for it?

Paul Williams: (*Stammering.*) You know what? We were shooting; I was staying out in Malibu, at the Malibu Outrigger. A car would pick me up at 4:30, I believe. At five o'clock, I reported a makeup. I would be in makeup from 5 to 6:30. They would break before they put

the chin on, and I'd have breakfast for a half an hour. Then they'd put the chin on, and then I'd report to the set.

I had been booked to do *The Tonight Show*— Understand, this is like 1970—what? '72? or something like that. So, I've been shooting this for a while, and a guy named Kenny Chase was doing my makeup. And I went, “You know what? God, Kenny, I'm booked to do *The Tonight Show* tonight.” And we're shooting late, and we're shooting later and later. I said, “If we take this off, and I try to get over there,” I said, “I'm not gonna make it.” It's like, “Would you go with me to this, and I'll just do the show in this?”

And he said, “Sure, I'll take it off after you do the show.” So, I called it—

Jesse Thorn: And you're just going to *The Tonight Show* to plug your appearing on *Midnight Special* or something.

Paul Williams: At this point, Johnny is probably booking me for *The Tonight Show*—or the bookers do, about every— I mean, I did—

Jesse Thorn: Every four months or something.

Paul Williams: You know, (*stammering*) I did it probably every six weeks. Or sometimes, you know, somebody would fall out, and I was a—you know, I was somebody that he enjoyed on the show. And I loved doing it, and it was always—it was never—there was not a lot of tension. It was always—it could be what it was.

But I called Doc Severinsen, and I said, “Doc, I'm coming in. I'm in ape makeup. I'm shooting.” I said, “So, I'm in full ape makeup. I want a two-top with a checked tablecloth. I need a cigarette burning in the ashtray. I have a cigarette holder, which I will bring with me. And I'll have a drink, and I'll sing “Here's That Rainy Day” in any key.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Clip:

Johnny Carson: So, would you welcome, please, Paul Williams.

(*Applause.*)

Music: Paul Williams Singing “Here's That Rainy Day” by Frank Sinatra.

Maybe I should have saved

Those leftover dreams

Funny, but here's that rainy day

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Paul Williams: But if you watch that footage again, you'll notice when I stand up to walk over to—I mean, I've been up since four in the morning. God knows what I've ingested. But you know, I'm still at a place where I'm sharp enough to deal with what I'm dealing with. But there's a little giddy up in my step that just looks like I almost fell over to the right. And I look at that and I go, “Look at you. You got really lucky that you caught yourself.”

Jesse Thorn: You've been sober for more than three decades now.

Paul Williams: 34 years.

Jesse Thorn: Do you get up every day and choose to be sober today?

Paul Williams: No, I get up every day and I go, “Lead me where you need me. You know, surprise me, God.” You know, in a blackout—in a blackout, I called a doctor. I had no intention of getting sober. I'd been to rehab once to try to keep the girlfriend.

[00:30:00]

But then I got drunk in Mexico and was out for two years. And I went to Oklahoma to do a gig, and I had a full-tilt psychotic episode. I was thrown down escalator stairs by a monster nobody could see but me. I mean, nuts. There's no escalator in that building. It was just stairs, but they were moving for me. Oh, they canceled the gig. The promoter of the gig was like, “Oh my god, what do we do?” Turned me over to the band. “Has he ever been like this?”

“No, but...” So, what happens? They cancel the gig, I do it the next day, tell the audience I had a reaction to my meds. True. I get on the plane, I drink on the plane, I call my dealer as soon as I hit LAX. And five days later in a blackout, I call a doctor on a Friday night. Saturday morning, the phone rings. I pick it up, and the doctor says, “I found a place for you.”

This is the most important story I'm going to share with you today. Doctor says, “I found a place for you.”

I said, “What are you talking about?”

He said, “You called me last night, and you said you wanted to get sober. You were looking for treatment.”

And I said, “Somebody else has been using my body,” and he did not laugh.

He said, “You called me, and you said that you didn't want to have to lie all the time anymore. That you didn't want to drive with your kids in the car loaded like your dad did with you anymore. That you didn't want to sneak out the puppy door to get more drugs and explain

that you had a squeaky front door, and if you used the front door, your girlfriend would wake up. And if you oiled the front door, she'd know something was going on.”

And I laughed. No, excuse me, I smiled, but I could not get past what he said as an opening line. Which is, “You didn't want to drive drunk with your kids in the car anymore.” So, I went to treatment. And I was detoxed for three days, and I came out of medical detox. Which if you're drinking a lot, and you're drinking every day, and you're listening to this, don't just stop drinking. Go to talk to a doctor about what you're doing, and get a medical detox.

And when I woke up from that medical detox, I had—something was missing in my life, and it was the cravings I had dealt with for probably 15 years.

Jesse Thorn: So much more to get into with Paul Williams after a quick break. Stay with us. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

Promo:

(Fantastical tinkling and sparkle sounds.)

Narrator: *(Echoing.)* Somewhere, in an alternate universe where Hollywood is smarter.

(Harp chords fade into applause.)

Presenter: And the Emmy nominees for Outstanding Comedy Series are *Jetpackula*. *Airport Marriott*. *Throuple*. *Dear America*, *We've Seen You Naked*. And *Allah in the Family*.

(Applause fades into harp chords.)

Narrator: *(Echoing.)* In our stupid universe, you can't see any of these shows. But you can listen to them on *Dead Pilots Society*.

(Rock music fades in.)

The podcast that brings you hilarious comedy pilots that the networks and streamers bought but never made. Journey to the alternate television universe of *Dead Pilots Society* on MaximumFun.org.

(Music fades out.)

Transition: Thumpy rock music.

Jesse Thorn: I'm Jesse Thorn. You're listening to *Bullseye*. My guest is Paul Williams.

I want to talk for a minute about the *Muppets*. You wrote and co-wrote some of the greatest Muppet songs over decades.

(Paul thanks him.)

And the biggest hit of them all was “Rainbow Connection”, which you co-wrote. You know, that is a song that opens the *Muppet Movie*, and it does drive the plot of the film in that it is ultimately about the idea of, you know, being willing to take on the world. Right? Which animates Kermit.

But what I think is really interesting about it is: here's the *Muppets*, the zaniest thing in the world, you know, doing kind of like 1930s humor.

Paul Williams: Waka-waka.

Jesse Thorn: Yeah, like silly nonsense and puns and craziness and goofiness. And that song is so wistful. Like, it is a song about, you know, wanting to be something bigger than yourself or whatever, but it is such an unusual tone to start that movie with. So, what did you and your co-writer like start with, taking on that challenge? Like, how did you end up with such a...?

Paul Williams: Well, first of all, I started out just by going over to be a guest on the *Muppet Show*. That's where I met them. And it was like I'd never been a member of a gang that had a treehouse.

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And when I walked on the set of the *Muppet Show*, I found a gang and a treehouse, and I felt like a part of that. And it was just so much fun and so safe.

I mean, the only thing I found that it matches it is when I got sober, the recovering community that I became a part of felt like a family. That's how big a deal it felt to meet Jim and Dave Goelz and Frank Oz and all the Muppet performers. And when I was then asked to do the *Muppet Movie*, the first thing I said to Jim is, “I really want to bring Kenny Ascher in.”

Kenny and I had written most of the songs for *A Star is Born*. We'd also written a full musical, which was never produced, about Dorothy Parker. And we were really well-tuned to each other. So, I said to Jim, “I really want him involved.” The very first meeting was to look at the script, see where the songs were going to go, what they'd be about—you know, spotted the songs.

And I'm walking Jim to his car, I said, “You know, we're not going to surprise you on this. This is really important stuff. This is your first feature. So, Kenny and I will show you what we're doing as we're working on it to make sure we're on the right track.”

He said, “Oh, Paulie, that's not necessary. I'll hear them in the studio.”

So, Kenny and I sit down to write. We want to—you know. And I ask him, I said, “So, what's Kermit doing in the swamp?”

And he says, “Uh, playing a banjo.”

Well, that kind of sets a certain tone for it. And a lot of the instruments, like tack pianos and banjos, that are very ring-a-ding, also when played with a bell, it has a certain—there's a nostalgia to it and a sadness and a sweetness.

So, Kenny and I start writing, and I think it's worth noting that we wrote ourselves into the most horrible corner you could to open the song.

Music: “Rainbow Connection” from *The Muppet Movie*.

Why are there so many songs about rainbows

And what's on the other side?

Rainbows are visions but only illusions

And rainbows have nothing to hide

(Music fades out.)

Paul Williams: Oh, what have we done? We just denied any magic to rainbows. You know, this is a mess.

Jesse Thorn: And do you start it there? You start at the beginning of the song.

Paul Williams: Yeah, exactly. Yeah, exactly like that. But then, all of a sudden, look what the universe gave us. Because then what we write is, “So, we've been told, and some choose to,” what we do, is you take Kermit away from the podium. He is no longer instructing an audience. He's sitting down with the audience and going, “So, we've been told, and some choose to believe it. I know they're wrong, wait and see. Somebody will find it, the rainbow connection. The lovers, the dreamers, and me.”

It just—it took us out of that corner into a place where we could really examine—we wanted to do what “When You Wish Upon A Star” does for Jiminy Cricket.

Jesse Thorn: I mean, I think that you call out like a really powerful specific about that song, which is not just the contrast between that opening of “rainbows aren't magical, yes they are,” but it's the we part in there.

(Paul agrees.)

That word, if it was an “I”, would still work, theoretically—as, you know, Kermit is the leader; it's his vision that takes them to Hollywood, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. But by making it “we”, it makes it about everybody.

Paul Williams: The next thing that occurs in the song, the other thing that is so important is basically it's my spiritual belief that we are empowered by what we dwell on, what we think. So, the lines that were created, that came out of me then were “who said that every wish would be heard and answered if wished on a morning star? Somebody thought of that, and someone believed it. Look what it's done so far.”

And so, the song at that point becomes about faith.

Music: “Rainbow Connection”.

Look what's it's done so far

What's so amazing that keeps us stargazing?

And what do we think we might see?

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: Okay, so my college roommate, Mike—shout out to Mike; wonderful guy—he was obsessed with three things. One of them was a type of industrial noise music that I couldn't bear. God bless Mike for enjoying this noise music, but the more nightmarish the sound the band was making, the more Mike was into it. He also loved the Carpenters. That was the second thing. And the third thing was the movie *The Phantom of the Paradise*. *(Chuckling.)* Two of these are Paul Williams things.

[00:40:00]

I don't know if you've ever written any songs for Throbbing Gristle or anything, but you've definitely—you wrote hit songs for the Carpenters and you wrote the music for and costarred in the movie *The Phantom of the Paradise*. *The Phantom of the Paradise* is a rock musical that was written and directed by Brian De Palma and is one of the most bonkers films ever made. Especially one of the most bonkers like coherent, competently-made films by professionals ever made.

Paul Williams: Yeah. It's weird.

Jesse Thorn: Did he come to you with a script for that movie and say, “I want to make this movie about a guy in an owl mask with steel teeth, and will you write semi-parody rock songs for it?” *(Chuckles.)*

Paul Williams: I have to do a throwback to something you said earlier. You talked about how totally unhip, what was coming out of me—which I've, you know. But my point is that based on what I had done up to then, maybe based on what I've done with my whole life, I was the worst idea he could have had to write the songs for *Phantom of the Paradise*. The fact that it worked out the way it did—which was an amazing blessing in my life, to not only have a chance to play this amazing—the devil, essentially, the juiciest role ever. But to, you know, kind of satirize all these different kinds of music that I loved but nobody knew that I loved.

Jesse Thorn: Right, because this is a movie where you play a kind of evil record producer/nightclub magnate, and there's a pure-hearted singer-songwriter whose music you steal and who you drive mad. And you're stealing his music for these acts that you're making that are these kind of weird versions of kind of—there's one that's sort of like a Kiss-like rock band, there's sort of a Beach Boys-y kind of band, and there's sort of just straight bubblegum pop.

Paul Williams: Yeah. And the interesting thing is that it's kind of the same—Swan is taking this Faustian cantata that Winslow is writing, and he is taking the songs that are touching—interesting songs, I think, that he's writing for Phoenix, who he loves so much. And then they are being bastardized into a Beach Boys type song to a... you know, “The Undead”, which is like heavy metal, is like—you know, is a big metal band. And then “Life at Last”, which is like Frankenstein. It's just—it was a chance to satirize all the kinds of music that I loved that I never—

And the way it happened is, right before Brian was looking for somebody, A&M decided they needed somebody to represent them for films. So, they hired a guy named Michael Arciaga. And I think one of the first or second meetings that he had, maybe the first, was with Brian De Palma, looking for somebody to write the songs. And I don't know how or why—The stuff that I had written that he would know would be “We've Only Just Begun” and “Rainy Days and Mondays” and “An Old Fashioned Love Song” and like “Out in the Country” and the like, but nothing that qualified me for the gig. Which is really cool. (*Laughs.*)

Music: “The Hell of It” from the album *Phantom of the Paradise (Original Motion Picture Soundtrack)* by Paul Williams.

Roll on thunder, shine on lightning

The days are long, and the nights are frightening

Nothing matters anyway

And that's the hell of it

Winter comes, and the winds blew colder

While some grew wiser, you just grew older

Well, you never listened anyway

And that's the hell of it

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: I mean, it's funny to think that you wrote songs that I will hear later today at some point. Like, I will be in the grocery store and hear one of the Carpenter songs that you wrote, and they're really good ones—like, ones to be proud of, too.

(Paul thanks him.)

And you'd think, “Well, there's my career.” But I'm sure that when you're out to dinner at Applebee's, the people—

Paul Williams: *(Amused.)* Every Tuesday when they have the special, yeah.

Jesse Thorn: Sure. The people that come up to you are either like, “Oh my god, you're from *Planet of the Apes!*” Or “Oh my god, you wrote the songs for and costarred in *The Phantom of the Paradise!*”

Paul Williams: It's amazing how—you know, I've been doing Comic Cons, and I'm really active in recovery. And it's for recovery and for music education and all.

[00:45:00]

Oh, the ASCAP Foundation is very active in music education. When I got sober, I went to UCLA and got my certification as a drug and alcohol counselor, entered into the Paulie Lama period of my life. I am the Paulie Lama. But the fact is that at these Comic Cons, there are like five or six areas— You know, a lot of people show up that know I'm the voice of the Penguin in the animated *Batman* series. A lot of *Smokey and the Bandit* fans, a lot of *Phantom of the Paradise* fans. The songs, the *Muppets*, of course/

And it's amazing because it's all kind of—I feel like I've been a guest in a lot of people's media—you know?—and just had the best breaks again and again. Right now, again, going back to *Phantom of the Paradise*—you know, Guillermo del Toro was a huge—I met him when he was a kid. In Mexico, I signed his album when he was a teenager. I'm working—Gustavo Santaolalla's writing the music, I'm writing the lyrics to *Pan's Labyrinth*, you know, for the stage.

And again, that's a gift in my life right now (*stammering*), you know, from *Phantom of the Paradise*. And it's just—and I am as excited about writing songs and acting and doing any of the things I get to do, and very seldom sit down and have this kind of a conversation where I feel that you get it! You know, you get it.

Jesse Thorn: Well, it's easy to talk to you. Well, Paul, I'm really grateful for your time, and thanks for making the trip after all that. It was really nice to get to meet you and talk to you.

Paul Williams: Yeah. More, please. Let's eat poke or sushi sometime soon.

Jesse Thorn: Great. It's a plan.

Paul Williams. Thank you to Paul for driving very far to us in traffic to come in for our interview and sharing so much of his time with us. Thank you also to Paul for writing 1,000 amazing songs. What a guy. If you want to keep up on what Paul's up to, he has a delightful Instagram. We will link to it from our Instagram, [@BullseyeWithJesseThorn](#).

Transition: Relaxed synth with a syncopated beat.

Jesse Thorn: That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye* was created from the homes of me and the staff of Maximum Fun—as well as at Maximum Fun headquarters, overlooking beautiful MacArthur Park in Los Angeles, California. You know what we've been eating lately? Baleadas. It's a Honduran specialty. It's sort of like a fluffier quesadilla with a little bit of extra stuff in it and Honduran cheese. We get those at Doña Bibi's, AKA Bibi's Restaurant right by our office. Great spot.

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, Daniel Speer. We get booking help from Mara Davis. Our interstitial music comes from our pal Dan Wally, also known as DJW. You can download music from *Bullseye*, pay what you will, and enjoy it at [DJWSounds.bandcamp.com](#). Our theme music was written and recorded by the great band, The Go! Team. The song is “Huddle Formation”. Thanks to The Go! Team; thanks to their label, Memphis Industries.

You can follow *Bullseye* on Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube—where you will find video from just about all of our interviews, including the ones that you heard this week. So, pull your phone out of your pocket—or you know, pull over your car; don't do it while you're driving—and search on YouTube for *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn*, and hit subscribe. Or do the same thing on Instagram or TikTok right now. Okay, 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.)