

[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.

Jesse Thorn: It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. The Bay Area rapper Saafir died last year. He was 54 years old. If you're a hip-hop fan, maybe you saw a headline about it. Maybe you missed it. You'd be forgiven though if you hadn't heard much beyond that about Saafir. I. He wasn't E-40 or Too Short or Tupac, although he and Pac were roommates for a while. Saafir put out only four full-length albums in his career. He was on a major label, one run by Quincy Jones, but he signed during a time when frenzied A&R guys were handing out contracts to independent rappers like they were show flyers. And Saafir never really became famous.

He also didn't really make commercial records. He almost never had hooks on his songs. The beats were off kilter and jazzy. His flow was—and I mean, my guest is gonna describe it as “impenetrable”, and I don't think that's inaccurate. But today we're gonna tell you a story about why Saafir's debut record, *Boxcar Sessions* from 1994, deserves to be inducted into the canon of great pop culture albums.

That's right. It's *Canon Ball*.

Transition: “Cannonball” by the Breeders, which ends with a series of cheers and a splash of water.

Jesse Thorn: Here to Induct *Boxcar Sessions* into the canon is our old friend Noz—Andrew Nosenitsky. Noz is an Oakland based record store owner and hip-hop writer. He's had bylines in *Pitchfork*, *Wire*, *The Fader* here at NPR, and most recently in his wonderful newsletter, “Light Sleeper”—which is named after a song by Saafir. Here's Noz.

Noz: What's going on? This is Andrew Nosenitsky, and the album I wanna talk about is Saafir's *Boxcar Sessions*.

Music: “Grab the Train” from the album *Boxcar Sessions* by Saafir.

This is J.Z and Saafir on the 24-track through a radio

Yeah, we just cooling, man, you know what I'm saying

I'ma let you know like this

I'm Saafir The Saucee Nomad...

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

Noz: Saafir is a West Oakland rapper and kind of a legend in the Bay Area hip-hop community. He was a member of Digital Underground for a little while. He was roommates with Tupac. He just kind of is known for really finding the most bizarre pockets in his raps. You know, it's almost become a cliché, like the lyrical miracle stuff—that's like the bad version of what he mastered. But yeah, just very like digging deep into the thesaurus, finding new cadences and flows, and finding new ways to say that he's the best rapper in the room.

Music: “Grab the Train”

... one time for ya mind

We got the Hobos in the house, you know what I'm saying

Big Nous, Poke Martian, and Rashinel

(Music fades out.)

Noz: The title, *Boxcar Sessions*, is both a reference to Saafir's crew—Hobo Junction, who took their name from a Jimmy Smith record, *Hobo Flats*. And then they just rolled with that. So, kind of this train car imagery. And then also, Saafir was very tied in with the graffiti scene. Mike Dream, who's kind of like an Oakland legend who passed away a few years later, has an interlude on the record.

Clip:

Saafir: Yeah, Mike Dream and his mother (*sensor beep*), here to represent on behalf of the Hobo Junction crew. Just gotta say, much love. That goes out to my brother Plan Bee, double E, straight out Sobrante Park, baby boy. Yeah. I wanna say what's up to all them graffiti writer (*sensor beep*) out there keeping it real.

Noz: So, one of the things that's really interesting about Saafir is that he is one of a handful of rappers from that era who were explicitly drawing on jazz music, and like out jazz in particular, in how they craft and structure their rhymes. I think if I had to explain it, it would

just be off the grid. It's like you're not rapping on 1, 2, 3, 4. You're wrapping in the like 1.25. You're wrapping in the gaps between everything. But let's start with "Light Sleeper".

Music: "Light Sleeper" from the album *Boxcar Sessions* by Saafir.

Ah, here we go

Yeah, I know I'm an emotionally disturbed person

People think I'm talking to myself when I'm rehearsing on the rhyme

A mass productionist of mass production, matador

Pan it more to the left, there you go

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

Noz: I think what's interesting about it is it's so mechanical, but it's also like loose. There's something very like springy about his flow where he'll bounce back and forth, and he'll bend in ways that you don't expect a rapper to do.

Music: "Light Sleeper"

Twice, in my trash can and I'm asking

I don't need psychology to see the dichotomy in me

Knew something was fishy but I'm better than wishy-washy or topsy-turvy

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

Noz: So, it has this very kind of murky sound that's rooted in what we now think of as traditional boom-bap, east coast style production. But it also has kind of the spirit of Oakland funk to it.

[00:05:00]

And it's just bizarre, man. It's claustrophobic. Like, it's very intense music. And it's a song about, you know, distrust and being an emotionally disturbed person.

Music: “Light Sleeper”

So what do it mean when I reach maturity

And still see that I'm not the mayor of my mayonnaise

The master of my milieu

At least I have a swing and a few things on my mind

It's never a good nighty night, just a rise 'n' shine

(Music fades out.)

Noz: It might be good for us to get into some of the biographical stuff, because he really has had like a— At this point, I think he was 23/24 when this album came out, and he had already— Like, he spent most of his childhood bouncing around like group homes and things like that. And I guess as a teen, he was in one of these group homes, and one of the counselors or whatever stole his jeans. And then he poisoned him with rat poisoning and got sent to jail for attempted murder for a few years. And that's where he had this awakening as a rapper.

And he like heard LL Cool J's, “I Need a Beat” on the radio. And he was like, “This is what I want to do.” And he started writing and writing. At one point, he also survives like this horrible plane crash. And at the same time, you know, he just is making this very difficult, insular music.

Music: “No Return (*Goin' Crazy*)” from the album *Boxcar Sessions* by Saafir.

In a slow silent walk, I hear that violent talk

I hear them talk

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

Noz: “No Return (*Goin’ Crazy*)” is just an example of him writing his (*sensor beep*) off.

Music: “No Return (*Goin’ Crazy*)”

I'm punctual like a star, I've harbored death

That stale taste embraced by my breath

Such mysteries in kissing these, she

Devils tell me ya pretty by the lamp in your attire

Nothing at stake

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

Noz: He goes, “I’m punctual like a star. I’ve harbored death, that stale tastes embraced by my breath.” That’s like Sylvia Plath tier. That’s real writing. That’s not like just rap writing. But then in the same time, there are things on the song that are just like, you know, bars.

Music: “No Return (*Goin’ Crazy*)”

... she's in the shower with him

Grim thoughts to nightmares

Women in millions when they sleep will reap the broth

Wrapped in mommy's cloth, a blurred touching

Who feels that delight? I'll have you on e-motions

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

Noz: He kind of bounces back and forth from this kind of like really stark, poetic voice to tough guy rapper in the same breath oftentimes, which I think is amazing.

Music: “No Return (*Goin’ Crazy*)”

You’ll burn, no return, going crazy

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

Noz: Some of the production too. It's like I couldn't really imagine another rapper even managing to rap on this stuff. Like, there's such a synergy between him and his producers. Like, nobody else would take this beat and even know what to do with it. Like, the only people I would think of were people who directly descended from Saafir in style.

Music: “No Return (*Goin’ Crazy*)”

Oh, I'm your son, I'm told

Oh, you mean the one that burns copper into brass

You got a weak chassis

Your blood owns no bones on the cash

The selling of ass fat pockets, dribble chestnuts

And I'm that pimp chipmunk, soaking

Sponge your funds up

I still roll with game, but lane changing slowly...

(Music fades out.)

Noz: You know, it actually took me a while to really get into Saafir, I would think. I think that like—I was like, “This is one of the rappers that are like the core, canonical underground west coast rappers. But I don't think it was years later until I was like, “Oh, this is something else.” Like, I think I was always like, “That man can rap,” but it would be years later before I'd get to the emotional core of the record and really understand it on like a deeper level.

Music: “Battle Drill” from the album *Boxcar Sessions* by Saafir.

I'm a kingpin, you can't win

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

Noz: Let's listen to “Battle Drill” from *Boxcar Sessions*.

Music: “Battle Drill”

Boxcar sessionist, black magic is the magnet

Breaking 'em down to micro fragments

I might go dragnet

Shoot Joe on Friday

If I miss, I'll get you one day

Won't forget officer Monday

I'm good with gun play, I get wrecked, check the boss

Don't remove your firing pin, punk, 'cause I get off

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

Noz: My best guess is the song's like a battle rap. You know, I think it's very much in the hip-hop tradition of talking (*ensor beep*). He just advanced it to a level that's like the most complex way to brag about how great you are and, you know, brag about you're the best rapper in the room.

Music: “Battle Drill”

I'm the arsonist, 'cause I'll burn you with the slug, I'm

Funky, plus I got carpet fresh in my rug

Tug a war and get dug six feet under

Floor plans are banned, combat hand-to-hand

Cowards' clocks is getting cleaned with detergent

If you want to freak a funky flow, we can splurge it

So, I'll perk like an expert

I'll send a flow that'll kill

But I won't break a sweat in a battle drill

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

Noz: I don't know. I think he's doing a lot of interesting stuff with like passive voice, like “floor plans are banned, combat hand-to-hand. Cowards' clocks is getting cleaned with detergent.” You know, it's punchline rap at a certain level, but it's this very advanced, complex, confusing form of it. Which is funny when you think about it, because it's like—if this is a diss record, you want both the audience and your opponent to know what you're talking about.

[00:10:00]

But s Saafir's whole thing was like, “No.”

Music: “Battle Drill”

I'll be lurking in the rear, smirking when you're crumbling

The Hobo Junctionist function is to freak the lyrical

Smoke a blunt to the grill 'til we reach the spiritual world

Then get with your girl, dip her like a tea bag (ah, ah)

Up it another notch for the flea bag

King queens be freaky fiends, don't sleep or fall off

Think they— the bomb, but like Tom, you'll get broke off

Sheer energy, so you know...

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

Noz: There's like this antagonism to what he's doing that's not just for the other person—like, the imagined third party that you're targeting your raps at that all rappers are like dissing, but for the audience as well in a really kind of fascinating way. Like, it's like antagonistic virtuosity. He has his vision of what he wants to do, and there's nobody else.

Music: “Battle Drill”

The impact is fat when I tag a grill for a battle drill

Battle drills

(Music fades out.)

Noz: You can't talk about Saafir without talking about this high-profile battle that he had with Casual and Hieroglyphics, who are another very revered Oakland crew kind of coming up at the same time. Those guys were all East Oakland, so there's a long history of microregional tensions that are coloring this battle.

But yeah, the long and short of it is that on Casual's debut album, there's a Saafir cameo, which is basically just a solo Saafir song. It's like a minute and a half long, and it's just severe rapping, and it is so good.

Music: “That Bullshit” from the album *Fear Itself* by Casual, featuring Saafir.

Schizophrenic tenant number one

When it comes to housing, arousing the intellect with intro-spect

Flex on me, huh, I don't think so... yet

My jetting is letting my exhaust defrost...

(Music fades out.)

Noz: I think a lot of the early response to that was that this is the best song on Casual's record, which I think also colored the feeling that likely sparked some early tensions between them. So, it comes time to record *Boxcar Sessions*, and Saafir calls Casual, is like, "Oh, I was on your record. Come to the studio. We'll do another song together. I did one for you; you do one for me."

Casual flakes on the session. Saafir takes it to heart. So, things are boiling over and it becomes *The Wake Up Show* with Sway and Tech. I mean, Sway now being a very prominent hip-hop personality, but they used to have an underground rap show. They invite Casual, they invite Saafir, to kind of air it out in a battle on the air.

Music: "Hieroglyphics vs. Hobo Junction Freestyle Battle" from Sway & King Tech.

Speaker: This is how we gon' do it. This side of the room, we got Hieroglyphics. This side of the room, we got Saafir and the Hobo Junction. We're gonna just go back and forth.

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

Noz: The tape of it is like an hour, and it's probably like ten dudes going back and forth.

Music: "Hieroglyphics vs. Hobo Junction Freestyle Battle"

[CASUAL]

Saafir The Saucee Nomad

I'm the boss we know that

Cas' is on the mic to let you know

No, I'm not waiting up

'Cause emcees is getting eaten up

...

[SAAFIR]

I'm getting docked by the trigger, playmate for my diction

Saucee with the science, the fact is there's no fiction

You're scary

The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air with a slang dictionary

—you still play Pictionary

With mom and dad

You grew up with wingdings named Buffy and Brad

(Music fades out.)

Noz: Basically, this is part of the press run for *Boxcar Sessions*, but it is this very messy conflict. And you know, Hiero was great. They're incredible rappers in their own right. But I think that eventually what happened was, where Saafir like doubled down and was like, "I'm this introverted rapper; I'm this street rapper," Hiero—the fact that they kind of had a more class-diverse crew and like came from the suburbs, they were more equipped for the internet. They were more equipped to like cater to skateboarders, and they like understood that like the audience for hip-hop was changing.

Which is something I think, you know, Saafir probably wasn't even thinking about at that point in his career. Like, again, he's a rapper. So. I mean, I feel bad, because I do think it sometimes eclipses his body of work beyond that. But we can't talk about him without talking about this kind of looming battle.

Music: "Playa Hata" from the album *Boxcar Sessions* by Saafir.

... perpetrator, but I'm much greater

It's best you let me wander, or I'll taunt ya with my brain

I'm the editor-in-chief, the leaf-a-rap a dope—

Antique rope kits...

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

Noz: *Boxcar Sessions* was warmly embraced by heads and diehard hip-hop fans and the type of people who are maybe already checking for Saafir based on his underground reputation. But it was more or less a commercial flop. And I don't think— You know, he did not put out another record for five years, and there was label drama.

Music: “Playa Hata”

The homeless shown, this skill is real when I attack from the back

I'll say a rhyme then pull your spinal cord from your torso, more so

Or better yet, more or less, it's not an option

I'm copping a plea, seizing a shop

And hoping the cops will blow off the past

If not, I'll be blowing his— away

J Groove is on the cross, I'm the heavyweight fader of a playa hata

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

Noz: I mean, I don't believe in canons, to be honest. I think it—like, it belongs in my canon of great albums, because I'm just mystified by it. You know, like I'll probably listen to it 'til

the day I die, and still find things to be surprised by in it. You know, I think if you're like, “What is the most impenetrable rap album ever made?”

[00:15:00]

There's a strong case to be made that this is the one. Which I think warrants repeat listenings, and warrants, you know, conversations like these.

Music: “Playa Hata”

Clever, never lacking when I'm stacking endeavors

I try and I try to tell fools...

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: Music writer Andrew Nosnitsky on *Boxcar Sessions*, the debut album from the late great Bay Area rapper, Saafir. We mentioned this before, but Noz has a terrific newsletter you can sign up for. It's called “Light Sleeper”. We'll post a link to it on the *Bullseye* page at MaximumFun.org.

There are few people who know as much about hip-hop as Andrew Nosnitsky has forgotten. Go check out that newsletter.

Transition: Thumpy, bluesy synth with a syncopated beat.

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—as well as at Maximum Fun HQ, overlooking beautiful MacArthur Park in Los Angeles, California. I've been seeing a lot of action on the new playground there in the park. Always nice to see those kids out playing!

Our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producers, Jesus Ambrosio and Richard Robey. Our production fellow at Maximum Fun is Hannah Moroz. Our video producer is Daniel Speer. We get booking help from Mara Davis.

Our interstitial music comes from our friend Dan Wally, also known as DJW. You can find his music at DJWsounds.bandcamp.com. Our theme music was written and recorded by The Go! Team. The song is called “Huddle Formation”. Thanks to The Go! Team. Thanks to their label, Memphis Industries. You can follow *Bullseye* on Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, where you'll find video from just about all our interviews, including the ones 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 fades out.)