

[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](http://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 is *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. When she was 18, Arooj Aftab was living with her parents in Lahore, Pakistan. She was recording music at home when, quite improbably, she had a hit. A bare bones lo-fi interpretation of one of the most covered songs in history, Leonard Cohen's “Hallelujah”.

**Music:** “Hallelujah” by Leonard Cohen, covered by Arooj Aftab.

*I heard there was a secret chord*

*That David played, and it pleased the Lord*

*(Music fades out.)*

**Jesse Thorn:** The recording went viral—not in the way that we might mean now, because this was the early 2000s. But the song got shared and shared and shared through email and apps like Napster and so forth. And you know, it kickstarted Arooj’s career. A year later, she moved to the United States to get a degree at the Berkeley School of Music. There, she focused on music production and engineering. She graduated, moved to New York, started getting work scoring and editing films. She had the beginnings of what was shaping up to be a solid, reliable career in music.

But Aftab’s dream wasn't scoring indie dramas. It wasn't recording whispery, lo-fi covers of Leonard Cohen songs either. She wanted to be a solo artist: a singer, producer, and composer. She wanted to record music that evoked the country in which she grew up and at the same time was fresh and new. And so, she did.

**Music:** “Mohabbat” from the album *Vulture Prince* by Arooj Aftab.

*Mohabbat karne waale...*

*(Music fades out.)*

**Jesse Thorn:** That's "Mohabbat", a single from Arooj's 2021 album, *Vulture Prince*. "Mohabbat" earned Aftab a Grammy Award for Best Global Music Performance, making her the first ever Pakistani to win a Grammy. Last year, she recorded a follow-up to *Vulture Prince* called *Night Reign*. Like *Vulture Prince*, it's ethereal and beautiful and haunting, but it pushes the boundaries of her songwriting even further: encompassing jazz, trip-hop, spoken word, and much more. You've gotta hear it yourself to understand what I mean. This song is called "Bolo Na".

**Music:** "Bolo Na" from the album *Night Reign* by Arooj Aftab.

*Bolo na*

*Bolo...*

*(Music fades out.)*

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

**Arooj Aftab:** Yeah, thanks for having me, guys!

**Jesse Thorn:** You have a degree in audio engineering from one of the best music schools in the world, the Berkeley College of Music. Did you get an audio engineering degree as like part of a plan to have a job if being a musician didn't work?

**Arooj Aftab:** Yes and no. I mean, I really am a nerd—so, nerd alert there. I would take things apart with screwdrivers and like investigate the sort of electrical circuits and stuff with my dad around the house. And so, I have had that—I did already have that interest in, you know, how circuitry and stuff works. And then of course—also, yeah, I had felt a little bit here and there that when I'd enter a studio, not knowing how everything worked and what I wanted and how to describe it was a bit of a—it was a bit of a hindrance in the process. And so, I was like, "I would really like to do this." I mean, and it's really exciting to know about microphones and stuff. I'm a gearhead.

*(They chuckle.)*

**Jesse Thorn:** What kind of gear did you have around the house when you were a teenager, before you went away to college?

**Arooj Aftab:** Yeah, I just—nothing. I mean, I had just like a mixer, a random Behringer mixer and an MXL microphone. And like the mic stand that they use like in the mosques and stuff and at like rallies. 'Cause I was in Pakistan, and so that's kind of what I had.

**Jesse Thorn:** When you say the kind of mic stand they had at a mosque or a rally—

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—are you talking about like a full-on podium?

**Arooj Aftab:** No, it's just sort of a—like a really heavy, steel mic stand. It's like a very local mic stand.

**Jesse Thorn:** I like the idea of a very local—I only use local mic stands.

**Arooj Aftab:** A very locally-made mic stand. Yeah. If that makes any sense.

**Jesse Thorn:** (*Chuckles.*) You mentioned that you like to tinker with things with your dad. Was engineering a way of selling moving 6,000 miles away to your dad?

**Arooj Aftab:** No. I mean, when I got there, I didn't have a major, and I was sort of just trying to figure out what exactly it I wanted to do. I thought I was gonna do like guitar, and then I thought I would do drums. And then I kind of— And it's a competitive major that is like longer than four years, and there's a lot of like entrance sort of tests. You have to be kind of smarter than the average musician, if that makes any sense.

(*Jesse laughs.*)

And that is a big thing, you know, in our community. And so, it was more of a—yeah, it was a decision afterwards and more out of interest. And yeah, it excited me to learn how to produce things and how to record stuff and how to manipulate sound. Like I said, I really— from very early on—was kind of into the discourse and the dissection of sound itself. And so, that played in really well with the major or what it was promising to teach me.

**Jesse Thorn:** Was it your plan to go to music conservatory? I mean, I don't just mean like the become an artist part of it. But like, applying for college is hard and complicated within your own country, and so adding to that—getting into a really intense, high level art school in another country—was that something that your parents were like, “Well, let's apply to all these high-end music colleges together,” or was it your project?

**Arooj Aftab:** It was entirely something that I did. And I actually only applied to Berkeley.

**Jesse Thorn:** Really?

**Arooj Aftab:** Yeah. (*Chuckling.*) I had a very like singular plan.

**Jesse Thorn:** How did you end up with that plan?

**Arooj Aftab:** I just realized kind of around the time that we were all finishing school and applying to colleges that the subjects that I had—like, I had economics and accounting and math, and I had further math as well. For some reason, I had all these like really challenging—interesting but challenging, you know—subjects that were leading me on this direction that I really wasn't interested in. And I fell really in love with music, and I passed the listener stage and the hobby musician stage. And I kind of felt more—like, still in a very young musician stage, but I felt— There was something in me that recognized to myself that I was a musician, and it wasn't just like a hobby or— It felt very, very serious to me.

And it actually became something around like—how old are we at that time? Like 17 or 18? I was like, “I can't actually do anything else. I really don't think I can do anything else. I don't want to.” It kind of became really obvious to me really suddenly, you know—like, almost like one day it was so clear that I would not survive if I didn't go all-in for this thing. And so, that's what I did.

**Jesse Thorn:** Did you have a particular vision of the kind of going all-in you were doing? Like, did you imagine yourself becoming a pop star or a concert pianist? Or was it just the idea of being a musician?

**Arooj Aftab:** At that stage, I just wanted to learn. You know, I just wanted to study. I just wanted the tools and the resources that would allow me to express myself musically. 'Cause I didn't have that. I didn't have any training. I just had all these ideas, and I just had all this passion for it, and I just had— I felt like I had really good tunes in my head. And so, I wasn't able to, at the time, think broadly. 'Cause you're also like a dumb teenager, you know? *(Chuckles.)* So, I didn't really have a larger plan, I don't think. Yeah, like you're saying a pop star—I don't really think fame or popularity or anything was part of it. It was just like a kind of like insane sort of passion for music.

**Jesse Thorn:** Were you recording yourself at home with that mixer and the mosque mic stand?

**Arooj Aftab:** Yes. Yes, I was. Definitely. What else were they for?

**Jesse Thorn:** Were you putting them on SoundCloud or something? I guess that's probably just before SoundCloud.

**Arooj Aftab:** Yeah. No, we were on Myspace. And I think at the time, like early 2000s, it was more like an email train thread. Really giving away the whole thing here. But yeah, no, way before SoundCloud.

**Jesse Thorn:** Was there ever a version of your career where you were a jazz singer of the professional jazz singer, non-experimental category? Where you went and sang *The Great American Songbook* in clubs and were entertainment?

[00:10:00]

**Arooj Aftab:** I mean, yeah. When I was done with college and I moved to New York, you need to get a job, you know? And you are either—yeah, a jazz singer in clubs or on a cruise ship or, you know, the GB band. Those are kind of your like immediate options, and you need to be prepared to do that. And I was. But it did just so happen that production and engineering degree took me to a different route, which was, you know, kind of doing audio and stuff.

**Music:** “Aey Nehin” from the album *Night Reign* by Arooj Aftab.

*Koi Baat Ho Gaie Ho Gi*

*Shayad Uun Ke Sheher Main*

*Achanak Raat Ho Gaie Ho Gi*

*(Music fades out.)*

**Jesse Thorn:** We've got so much more to get into with Arooj Aftab. Stay with us. It's *Bullseye* for [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and NPR.

**Music:** “Aey Nehin” fades back in.

*Aey Nehin Abhi Tak*

*Koi Baat Ho Gaie Ho Gi*

*(Music fades out.)*

*(ADVERTISEMENT)*

**Transition:** Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

**Jesse Thorn:** It is *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. I'm talking with singer and composer Arooj Aftab.

The kind of music that you make on your own records is so sui generis—like, it is so your music—that I kind of wonder if you miss the feeling of just having a bunch of people that do

the same kind of thing that you do. Like, you have a jazz world, certainly, of people who are each bringing their own flavors of jazz. But like, if you were just trying to be Abbey Lincoln, you would be in a world of like people who really get exactly what that is: the same thing that you're into. Do you miss that feeling?

**Arooj Aftab:** I feel like I don't miss that feeling. I love listening to people like Cécile McLorin Salvant kind of change what it means to be a jazz singer while really also building around the traditional jazz sort of idiom. It's really amazing to see that. I think it's really exciting, and I think it's our—I think, as creatives, that's what we should kind of be doing a little bit, like seeing what's next and how that goes. I have so many great, straight-ahead jazz musician friends. And I love going to their shows, and I love being a listener and that. 'Cause we can't go see Nina Simone or Abbey Lincoln live. Right?

But then the people who are alive right now, who—I don't wanna say like “sound like that”, but essentially are coming from a more traditional jazz, it's amazing. I'm so glad that they exist. I've worked really hard to create this new sound inside of—with my jazz training at the nucleus of it, that it is becoming something that feels a little normal and familiar to people. Which is mind-blowing. Like, that's just crazy. And that is something that I wanna stay focused on.

**Music:** “Last Night” from the album *Vulture Prince* by Arooj Aftab.

*Maang le bande tu*

*Maang le bande tu*

*Tu apne...*

*(Music fades out.)*

[00:15:00]

**Jesse Thorn:** I hate asking about “what are your influences,” but I was reading an interview where you were answering that question, and one of the answers was Meshell Ndegeocello.

She's one of my all-time favorites, like since adolescence. What is it about her music? She, of course, is a legendary bass player, singer-songwriter, and jazz funk musician, broadly speaking.

**Arooj Aftab:** Meshell is an extremely bad cat for sure, and has been that way since—I don't even know, like the '80s or the '90s? And possibly—I had made it a fact in my mind that every record that I have liked has Meshell playing bass on it. And I don't think it's true, but

like all the stuff—like at least the R&B things, like all from the ‘80s, ‘90s, early 2000s— Well, at least most of the ‘90s I was just like, “That’s Meshell.”

But at the same time, I have listened to her entire discography. I have been a fan of her music, of her bass playing and her—yeah, just her songs, her songwriting, her bass playing, her singing, her lyrics, her emotionality, her timing. There’s just so much that she’s offering. She’s someone who I met pretty early on when I moved to New York, and that’s one of the reasons why I even fell in love with New York. I was like, “Oh my god, I can just hang out with Meshell for—” And I also actually ran into Meshell at Berkeley. I was going down a hallway, and she was going the other way, and I was like, “Hey, Meshell.”

And she was like, “Hey,” and just kept going. I think she was like a visiting—like, doing a masterclass or something. That was our interaction. So, Meshell’s been in my sort of inspiration for a while in this really organic and almost like close way, like someone around and real and so good at music.

**Jesse Thorn:** Something that I see in your music or hear in your music that I imagine could be partly inspired by her is a kind of expansive notion of genre that is not necessarily like self-conscious, right? Like, when Michelle is recording, you feel like she’s moving across boundaries just for regular reasons. Just ‘cause that’s the right thing to do in that situation, rather than because she’s like, “Oh, I’m gonna be the genre pusher, blah, blah, blah.” And your music is so organically of itself. You know what I mean?

**Arooj Aftab:** Why thank you. Yes. Yes. That part of it is really essential, the non-con contrivedness, right? You can’t plan the fusion or the crossover or whatever. Like, you can’t go in thinking about genre at all. It’s a very personal—like you said, it’s a very organic—it’s just natural. It should feel natural. And it is natural. Like, the world is so old, and you know, we’ve gone around and around like a million times. And we’re excavating, you know, people that were here—I don’t know, like whatever—however thousand years ago and all these other— Like, we’ve done this. (*Laughs.*) You know what I’m saying? Like, we’ve done this already, and the music has lots of kinship. All the different musics have a lot of kinship.

And I think when I’m thinking about music, I see the common threads, and I don’t feel like ethno-musicologically inclined to explain or to find out what is the real etymology. I just hear it, and I wanna be able to not just hear it; I want to be able to play it back, you know? And so, then it’s like, “Let’s make it, let’s record it. Let’s be able to have this thing that feels that way and is not forced. It just is.”

**Music:** “Mohabbat” by Arooj Aftab.

*Mohabbat karne waale kam na hoñge*

*Terī mehfil meñ lekin...*

*(Music fades out.)*

**Jesse Thorn:** Why do you sing mostly in Urdu? I mean, you also sing in English, but it's probably three quarters/a quarter on your records.

**Arooj Aftab:** I sing in Urdu, and I sing in English.

[00:20:00]

Because those are the—embarrassingly—the only two languages that I know, and I think in them, and I dream in them, and I like them a lot. Urdu works better, because I get to hide a lot of secrets in the lyrics. I really don't like when things are really on the nose when I'm just straight up telling you how it is. You know, I haven't become mature enough, I guess, to say what I wanna say directly. *(Chuckles.)* I like the indirectness of the lyrics, and so Urdu helps with that, because it's very metaphorical. And it's phonetically nice. And then English is nice too. I haven't written a lot in English, but I might—I don't know. I might keep a balance. Yeah, we'll see. I like them both.

**Jesse Thorn:** Tell me what you mean when you say that Urdu is metaphorical.

**Arooj Aftab:** There's a lot of languages that are metaphorical and really poetic. Yeah. You mean to say something, but you say it indirectly. Right? That's what a metaphor is. And that's kind of what poetry is. It's very—it uses a lot of analogy. It's very romantic also. You don't just say, “I love you.” You say like aaall this other stuff, you know? And so, I like that.

**Jesse Thorn:** Do you get to perform ever for audiences that are mostly Urdu speakers?

**Arooj Aftab:** Yeah, 'cause they're everywhere. And they come to the shows. And they are having obviously like a different experience than people around them, and it's fun. I feel like Urdu speakers, Pakistanis, they're loud and free. And so, they're just like, “Yeah!” Like, they are more like the hecklers in the crowd. They're like—they will let you know that they're having a good time and that they love you. So, yeah.

**Jesse Thorn:** We'll wrap up with singer and composer Arooj Aftab after the break. Back in a minute. It's *Bullseye* from [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and NPR.

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**Promo:**

**Brenda Snell:** Have you been looking for a new podcast all about nerdy pop culture? Well, I have just the thing for you!

*(Voice echoing.) Secret Histories of Nerd Mysteries!*

**Music:** Upbeat rock music.

**Austin Taylor:** *Secret Histories of Nerd Mysteries* in a weekly pop culture history podcast, hosted by me: Host Austin.

**Brenda:** And me! Host Brenda. We've already tackled mysteries such as: What happened to the puppets from *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*? Is Snoopy Mexican? And why do people hate Barney so much?

**Austin:** From theme parks to cartoons; to '80s, '90s, and 2000s nostalgia, we tackle it all!

**Brenda:** Check us out every Tuesday on [MaximumFun.org](https://MaximumFun.org) and wherever you get podcasts.

*(Music fades out.)*

**Transition:** Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

**Jesse Thorn:** I'm Jesse Thorn. You're listening to *Bullseye*. I'm talking with musician Arooj Aftab.

What's the thing in your life in New York that most reminds you of your childhood and adolescence back home in Pakistan?

**Arooj Aftab:** So, New York has a season that is very similar to the monsoon, when it's warm and it's raining a lot. And it happens every year, and it's right now, also. And whenever that happens—And I've always managed to live in a neighborhood that is green, has green. Like, I could never live in Bushwick, you know. So, I've been in Bed-Stuy, I've been kind of in the brownstone Brooklyn treelined situation. And then if not, I will go to the park or whatever.

So, for the last however long it's been that I've been here—like, 20 years—every summer when there's that monsoony New York weather where it's kind of warm and it's rainy, I miss home a lot. And it's just very similar. And it's like thunderclaps, you know?

**Jesse Thorn:** I remember very vividly as a child—you know, 10/12-year-old maybe?—being with my mother's family in Washington, DC and experiencing that for the first time as a native San Franciscan and it being completely overwhelming. Like, it's such a different way of the world around you being. *(Chuckles.)* It's such an intense feeling.

**Arooj Aftab:** Yeah. And if you don't mind being in the rain, it's kind of like a reset.

[00:25:00]

I always like to do one time where I'll just let it completely—like, I can get completely soaked, and then I come out of there, and I'm just like, “Okay, I'm cleansed for the year. Whatever's been happening, it's gone, and I can go—” It's like a little bit of a—like a ritual.

**Jesse Thorn:** Do you think of yourself these days primarily as American?

**Arooj Aftab:** Oh god! What are we?

*(Jesse chuckles.)*

Do I think of myself as primarily American? No, I just don't think I'm any one thing. I've become very American, and I can sense that when I speak in European countries, just like, “Oh god, that's so annoying. Who is it? It's me.” *(Laughs.)* You know? Like—

**Jesse Thorn:** *(Laughing.)* What is an example? Please give me an example.

**Arooj Aftab:** It's just, you know, like our accent sounds like— And my accent has become more American over time. Sometimes when I'm talking to my older brother, when we speak to each other in English, I am aware of it. And I wonder if he's like thinking that our accent has changed. But I feel very Pakistani too. I just feel like super familiar with everything there. And sometimes— Like, this year we went to the Middle East a couple of times. And you know, I was born in Saudi Arabia, and I was there until I was 11. So, I spent 11 years in Saudi, then another 10/11 years in Pakistan, and then the rest in the US. And so, it's kind of compartmentalized.

But yeah, when I'm in the Arab land, I also feel like this is my spot. You know, I know about this. I know about the dates; I know about the weather; I like the desert. I know the culture, because I was born there and I lived there. So, I don't know. I feel like I'm from all over the place.

**Jesse Thorn:** It's interesting, 'cause like you've dedicated your life to the most American art form that there is of jazz. And— Was that a, “I haven't dedicated my life to it” ‘eh, maybe’, or maybe Jazz isn't the most American art form? You're more of a musical theatre person?

**Arooj Aftab:** Uh, yeah. I don't know if jazz is the most American art form that there is. But what do I know? In this moment— And I don't even know if my art form is only jazz, right? It's, again, that thing where we just kind of lose ourselves in trying to define what it is that we're doing, and that negatively affects the process of creating—you know—when you're really trying to over compartmentalize what's happening. That's not how anything actually happens.

Jazz is a code, and it also is something that is like a religion. It's like a commonality. And it also deserves a lot of respect, because it came from somewhere really, really intense, and you often forget about that.

**Jesse Thorn:** Have you ever thought about just making music that jams? Do you ever want to just make dance music or party music?

**Arooj Aftab:** Oh yeah, all the time. I always wanna do that, 'cause I love so much to party. I am the partier, and the party is always around me, and it's always at my house, and I love it. And then I lately have been insisting that my music is fun. Which is not going so great.

*(They laugh.)*

**Jesse Thorn:** You might have better luck with “beautiful” or something, yeah.

**Arooj Aftab:** Yeah, I know, but beautiful is so boring. I'm tired! I don't wanna be like nice anymore. I want to be fun and like edgy. Which I am. Like, look at me. You know? And I think my personality is more like, “Let's have fun, and let's party, and let's like be super unserious,” you know? And at the same time, the music feels like it's sooo serious, but it's not serious. You're right. It's just very beautiful. It's very playful. It's flirty. It's not party-fun. But you know, I've done a few scoring things like for a video game and stuff. And so, in those situations I was able to write party music and like just different things based on whatever was happening in the game. And that was awesome.

**Music:** 2910ish “Public Disquiet” by Danshin and Arooj Aftab—an atmospheric jazz track from the videogame *Backbone*.

*(Music fades out.)*

**Arooj Aftab:** When you're just scoring something, you don't have to be like, “Oh my god, this is like my song.” You know? And they're gonna freak out, and you're just suddenly switching gears, like all of that stuff. You can just do whatever. But like I have so much love for music that is groovy. And not just dance music. Like, Dilla and Karriem Riggins and, you know, Afrobeat, and all this sort of like fun Brazilian rhythms, and all that stuff.

[00:30:00]

I have been sneaking them into the music, and I think I'm just gonna continue to do that. As I continue to insist that the music is fun, I notice that it's like—what is it called? Like, manifesting it? You're just like, “It is, it is, it is!” And then slowly and surely, after a little while it becomes that.

So, you know, the recent Khruangbin remix of my lead single, that helped insist more that it's fun, because now it is fun. 'Cause they've like put a solid dance groove to it and stuff. So, it's happening.

**Jesse Thorn:** Well, I can't imagine a better way to end an interview here on National Public Radio than with the insistence that jazz is fun. So.

(They laugh.)

I really appreciate getting the chance to talk to you.

**Arooj Aftab:** Amazing.

**Jesse Thorn:** Thank you so much for joining me on the show.

**Arooj Aftab:** Thank you so much for having me.

**Jesse Thorn:** Arooj Aftab. Her latest album, *Night Reign*, is out now. She's currently playing festivals all over the world. She just announced a four-night residency at the famous Blue Note in New York City.

**Transition:** Bright, chiming synth.

**Jesse Thorn:** That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye* is created in 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. Things have been quiet in the park lately. It's kind of a bummer.

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 Hannah Moroz. Our video producer is Daniel Speer. Special thanks to Jacob Derwin at Technica House in New York City for recording our interview with Eugenio Derbez. We get booking help on *Bullseye* 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](https://djwtounds.bandcamp.com). Our theme music was written and recorded by The Go! Team. It's 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](https://MaximumFun.org) and is distributed by NPR.

(Music fades out.)