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(ADVERTISEMENT)

Promo:

Jesse Thorn: Hey gang, it's Jesse. We're about to go into another episode of *Bullseye*, but first I wanted to tell you about something really exciting. We are ringing in 25 years of *Bullseye* all the way through this fall. 25 years! I started this show when I was 19 years old! Don't do the math.

What does that mean? Well, we have a whole month of special shows, new and old—and also other cool stuff! So, earlier this month I did 25 interviews in a row live on video. You can watch me talking with Tony Hale and Lisa Loeb and Elvis Mitchell and Bob Odenkirk and Patton Oswalt and 20 other people, again, in a row on the *Bullseye* YouTube page.

We're also going on the road. November 1st will be at the Kuumbwa Jazz Center in Santa Cruz. I'll talk with Adam Scott, Boots Riley and Glen Washington. We will have comedy from Scott Simpson and music from the Mermen. Then on Saturday, November 15th, we have a huge show at the Pit Theater in New York City—which is the first place I ever did a live version of this show. I will have the great Tony Shalhoub, who has a new food show on television. Jad Abumrad from *Radio Lab*, who has a great new podcast about Fela Kuti, and H Jon Benjamin from *Archer* and *Bob's Burgers*. Plus! We'll have standup comedy from Josh Gondlemman and music from Kristin Anderson-Lopez and Bobby Lopez—the latter of whom is an EGOT! He got every award you can get in show business! It's gonna be great. That's at the Pit in New York, November 15th.

I hope that you'll celebrate all that stuff with us. Go to MaximumFun.org/events to find out more. And thanks.

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. In this day and age, musicians live in a paradox. It's never been easier to record your own album. A good mic and a MIDI controller will cost you maybe 500 bucks. Once you have those, you basically have all the tools you need to make a hit record right there in your bedroom. Build a song from the ground up, beat by beat, chord by chord, line by line. But we live in the age of streaming. Recorded music has never

been easier to listen to, and it's never been cheaper. To make money to be able to have time to make those records everyone wants to hear, you have to tour. Don't like touring? Well, unless you're, you know, Frank Ocean or something, too bad.

My guest, Yaya Bey, considers herself a songwriter first and a recording artist second. And if you've seen her Tiny Desk Concert from last year, you know, she's also a great live performer. She's happy to do all that, but the place where she really finds her voice is in the studio. Yaya broke through last year with *Ten Fold*, a 16-track exploration of R&B hip-hop house, and lo-fi made a bunch of top 10 lists. It's absolutely breathtaking.

Music: “chasing the bus” from the album *Ten Fold* by Yaya Bey.

Ah, ah, ah, ah

Tomorrow's coming

Today is always on her way out

I love you, baby

But it seems we've been stuck in a drought

The storm is coming

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: This past June she released *do it afraid*. In the vein of *Ten Fold*, she crisscrosses genres effortlessly, adding a little soca into the mix and even some electro.

Music: “bella noches pt. 1” from the album *do it afraid* by Yaya Bey.

Rent is too high, wages too low

Homegirls can't drop it low to the floor

Can't get down at Bella Noches no more

Where the hell could you

Where the hell could you

(Do it right, do it right)

Rent is too high, wages too low

Homegirls can't drop it low to the floor

Can't get down at Bella Noches no more

Where the hell could you

Where the hell could you go?

Go, oh-oh, could go?

Uh, uh, uh

(Music fades out.)

Bey just wrapped up a national tour in support of the album. She was kind enough to stop by our studios to talk. Let's get right into it. Here's raisins from her new record.

Music: “raisins” from the album *do it afraid* by Yaya Bey.

Stir it up

Turn it over

'Til it ain't the same no more

'Cause I've been running

Hightailing

But I can't run no more

(Music fades out.)

[00:05:00]

Jesse Thorn: Yaya, welcome to *Bullseye*. It's so nice to meet you. So, nice to have you on the show.

Yaya Bey: Hi.

Jesse Thorn: I've heard you describe yourself not as a singer first. So, if you're not a singer first, what do you think of yourself as first?

Yaya Bey: I'm a songwriter and I'm a recording artist, I would say.

Jesse Thorn: Was that always your goal? Did you always imagine yourself on stage, or did you imagine yourself behind the scenes?

Yaya Bey: Uhh, (*chuckles*) behind the scenes, definitely not on stage. (*Laughs.*) Being on stage is like terrifying, but I mean, I gotta do it. But yeah, I live in the studio, like that's where I thrive. That's why I make so many albums. (*Chuckles.*) Yeah.

Jesse Thorn: Is being on the stage still terrifying to you?

Yaya Bey: Yeah, absolutely. I hate it.

(*They laugh.*)

Jesse Thorn: How does it feel?

Yaya Bey: Like being on a roller coaster. You know, when you're on a roller coaster, it's like—it's kind of fun, but mostly I think I'm gonna die.

(*Jesse laughs.*)

But like it's kind of fun.

Jesse Thorn: What keeps you doing it?

Yaya Bey: I like to make the albums. And I do the shows in service of the album to promote the album. It helps to meet people. You know, when I play shows I usually come out, and I talk to people when I can. For a lot of the tour, I was able to. And that helps to like put faces to the listeners and like just connect with people. That part is cool. I continue to make the albums. I love making the albums. So, the touring comes with that, you know, and it helps support the album.

Jesse Thorn: I would imagine that it's also a chance to connect with a band. I mean, the experience of playing with a band on music that's probably mostly composed piece-by-piece in the studio is a really different experience of the music.

Yaya Bey: Yeah. Performing the music and recording the music are a completely different process. Yeah.

(Sighs.) You know, I'm fresh off a tour right now, so I'm still like processing what I just experienced. But I guess what I could say now is, yeah, it's definitely two different things, for sure. Two different relationships with the music. The relationship you have with the music when you write it, the relationship you have with the music when you record it are also different. You know, it happens in phases. 'Cause even before you record it, it's just a hypothetical thing that could happen that you're writing and you know, you don't have to be too precious about it. And then you get in the studio, and then there's a little bit more eyes on it. And then you take it to the stage, and there's like so many eyes on it. It's different. Yeah.

Jesse Thorn: When you're writing music, what pieces are there when you have a pen in your hand or you're singing into your voice memos or whatever? Are you writing on a piano? Are you writing to a beat somebody emailed you? Are you writing in the studio with a producer? What are the pieces?

Yaya Bey: It depends. Sometimes it's something someone sent me. Sometimes it's something that I'm making at home, you know, with samples and things. Or sometimes it's something I wrote before, and then I'm trying to find the right music for it. Depends. Every song is different.

Jesse Thorn: What do you have sitting around the house? What's sitting on your work desk?

Yaya Bey: Uhh, that also depends. *(Laughs.)* At some points in my career, it was a 404, like an SB-404. Sometimes it's just a laptop.

Jesse Thorn: A 404 is like a sampling keyboard?

Yaya Bey: Yeah, like a little sample machine. Sometimes it's just a laptop. Sometimes it's just my phone. It really just depends. Sometimes it's a ukulele. *(Laughs.)* You know, it just depends.

Jesse Thorn: Is it a standard size ukulele? Are we talking about a concert? We're talking about a tenor?

Yaya Bey: Tenor. Yeah. I have a tenor, and I have a concert. Yeah.

Jesse Thorn: I'll tell you, like I am a horrible musician, and I learned to play the ukulele a little bit as an adult. And I'm grateful to the ukulele for being... ridiculous enough that I can play it barely passably, and it feels like I'm doing a bit rather than when I—*(snickers)* if I were playing a guitar that poorly, I would just be a jerk.

(They laugh.)

You know what I mean?

[Yaya affirms.]

[00:10:00]

But on the other hand, I still definitely feel ridiculous holding one.

Yaya Bey: I love it! I love how small it is. I mean, I'm not gonna make an album with the ukulele, but I like it. I think I'm gonna continue to do like interludes with the ukulele. It's like my little thing.

Jesse Thorn: Are you like sitting there just working at chord progressions, or are you ripping sweet solos on the uke?

Yaya Bey: Just little chord progressions, yeah. I think I use it— It's like my little interlude thing. I have these little things that I do on albums that are like just little things for me. Like, I'm gonna rap a little bit on an album. There's always gonna be some kind of like Caribbean/West Indian sound. Like, they're just little things that I'm adding to—like, things to expect. You know, even if they're just small interludes or small little things. So, I think the uke is like a thing like that.

Music: “a tiny thing that’s mine” from the album *do it afraid* by Yaya Bey.

Waiting for my turn's the blues

But oh, don't you worry

'Cause time's in no hurry

Better find something to do

(Music fades out.)

Yaya Bey: It's just a little comfort thing I have. I like how it feels in my hand. You know, *(chuckles)* whatever kind of thing. Yeah.

Jesse Thorn: It's very approachable. Like, you're never gonna get intimidated by a ukulele.

Yaya Bey: No. Yeah, it's just... just a little fun thing.

Jesse Thorn: We got a lot more to get into with Yaya Bey. Keep it locked. It's *Bullseye* for MaximumFun.org and NPR.

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Transition: Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

Jesse Thorn: Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. I'm here with Yaya Bey. She's a singer and songwriter from New York City. Her 2024 album, *Ten Fold*, was a smash hit. Earlier this year, she followed that up with *do it afraid*, which is out now. Let's get back into our conversation.

I think when your music goes up-tempo, often it's either like towards soca or Caribbean music, or it's towards like dance music.

Music: “merlot and grigio” from the album *do it afraid* by Yaya Bey.

When I pull up to my bumpa bay

Don't be lazy

Put ya back in this whine

Baby, come catch this whine

Maybe it won't be easy

Maybe it won't come fast

Maybe it's a little bit spicy

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: Did you grow up listening to that kind of music?

Yaya Bey: Well, yeah. I mean, my family's from Barbados. Well, one side of my family's from Barbados. And yeah, I grew up listening to a lot of soca. My dad was a big reggae head. So, you know. I'm from New York, so I went to reggae parties, dance hall parties, you know.

dolla vans, the whole thing. And then like house music is something that I kind of got into in my teen years.

[00:15:00]

And then, you know, I lived in DC for a long time, and a lot of my friends were DJs. And so, I would just hear house music a lot. I worked with Zach Exactly, who's from Baltimore. So, like he brings in like a club element.

Jesse Thorn: And when you say a club element, you mean— Some folks don't know there's like a native music genre to Baltimore called Baltimore club music.

Yaya Bey: Yeah, he kind of brings that in. And you know, like—again, like living in DC for a while, I have a lot of friends who are DJs that are like playing jungle, playing house, playing club, you know? So, all of those things kind of like influenced the choices I make when I make up-tempo music. I guess I'm just referencing everything in my life that's like real and tangible for me. So, it's just—yeah.

Jesse Thorn: Do you think people are surprised that your music isn't more hip-hoppy? That tends to be the North star for R&B music in the last 25 years or so, I guess. 25 or 30 years.

Yaya Bey: I would say that it, that at some points it's extremely hip-hoppy. And then sometimes it's not. I think— I mean, 'cause, you know, if you listen to a record like “cindy rella”, that's very hip-hoppy.

Music: “cindy rella” from the album *do it afraid* by Yaya Bey.

And so, I stepped out, Fendi bag, Mary J Fly

I was boho, knotless, how could you deny?

I was everything, jamming like everything is you

You was supposed to wine and dine me

We was supposed to rendezvous

Keeping secrets like a Mason Margiela

Keeping tabs on me

You stepping out

It's Ramadan, you breaking fast on me

You telling lies, you breaking oath, writing a past for me

(Music fades out.)

Yaya Bey: I kind of weave in and out of everything that I am, which I think— Like, maybe this is having a negative impact on my career, because I am like trying to embody all of myself. But it's just more fun that way than to like pretend to be one-dimensional. You know? Because I mean, the thing is I'm from New York, and then I moved to DC. And like being from New York, just that alone is like—I was inspired by hip-hop. I was inspired by the R&B that lives at the intersection of hip-hop. I was inspired by soca and reggae and house music. And then I moved to DC and like got introduced to go-go and like jazz in a new way, house in a new way, club, jungle.

Like, all of these things are introduced to me. And at this point in my life, I'm pretty well traveled, and I've seen a lot. And that's gonna show up, you know? But then I think people are like, “Why do you have—” Like, my last record, there were so many people—or like, journalists, they were like, “This is not cohesive.” And I'm just like you just don't know this walk of life. But if you knew this walk of life, you would know exactly what story I'm trying to tell. I think being Black, period, is very vast. Because when you look at the diaspora, there's so many ways to be Black, just from a global stance. And then when you take a little bit more micro, and you think about what it means to be Black in America, that is so vast.

You know, like I just did a US tour, and what it means to be Black in the south is not the same thing that it means to be Black in the north. It's not the same thing that it means to be Black in the Midwest. And like, we all have this connection to the south. And we took that and through the Great Migration have become many, many things just in this country alone. And like, to be Black from the northeast region of the country, like... that in itself is so vast. Because there's so many types of Black people that have migrated to this region of the country.

So, if you know that, then—you know—what I'm doing with my music, it makes sense. You just have to like take into consideration who I am and who I've been saying this whole time that I am and what that really means. I just think, you know, maybe it's hard for some people to like conceptualize that.

Music: “iloveyoufrankiebeverly” from the album *Ten Fold* by Yaya Bey.

Come on, baby, pass the blunt

You know I miss that sticky stuff

You know how I be on the run

From like fifty'leven emotions

And the bills don't get paid by themselves

And they never ask me if I'm well, so

I'll call you when I get time to

(Music fades out.)

[00:20:00]

Jesse Thorn: As a White person, I feel like the record that you have made that is the greatest. assertion of your Blackness is “iloveyoufrankiebeverly”.

(They chuckle.)

Because I think White people, in terms of Black music, think of the Blackest music often as being like the bluesiest music or the churchiest music. You know, the gulliest hip-hop, whatever. Right? And I think that if you looked at Spotify charts and you said, “What is the thing that has the greatest proportion of Black people listening to it relative to White people listening to it?”, Frankie Beverly and Maze would win by 1,000%. *(Laughs.)*

Yaya Bey: Yeah. I go to Europe, and I—you know, every time I play that song, *(unclear)* you know, Frankie Beverly is my favorite musician, and you can tell like nobody knows who that is. And that's so strange to me. Because growing up, you know, the way that I did, like everybody knows. Like, *(hums a bar)*. Like—and everybody knows exactly what to do. Like, “Okay, we're gonna do the electric slide now.”

(Jesse laughs.)

Like, we all know what that is and what to do. So, yeah, it's strange. But I mean, you know, that's like—you know.

Jesse Thorn: There is this era of music that comes before hip-hop was on the radio—like, hip-hop existed for sure. But like before hip-hop was on the radio, after disco—you know, the end of disco/beginning of disco. And like, whether it is Frankie Beverly or like Tina Marie—

Yaya Bey: Or like Alicia Myers. *(Singing.)* “I wanna thank you, heavenly Father.” Mm-hm. Yeah. It's an era. Yeah. Yeah. That's my favorite time. And I feel like growing up in New York, cookouts? That's New York cookout music. Like, Alicia Myers and like Stephanie Mills and like—yeah, like Tina Marie. And even some (unclear) got some joints that are like in that space, and Frankie Beverly, and like some Gap Band joints are like kind of living in that space too.

(Jesse chuckles.)

That's my favorite.

Jesse Thorn: Tell me about what a cookout was like when you were a kid.

Yaya Bey: A lot of music, for sure. And like, I remember my dad and my uncle were always like drunk and discussing like old times that I wasn't around for and like, music. I come from a family—specifically, like my dad and my uncle; they're like music encyclopedias. You can call my uncle right now, the most obscure hip-hop sample that like nobody's supposed to know what this is. He can tell you what it is. And not only can he tell you what it is, he can tell you what year it came out. And not only can he tell you what year it came out, he can tell you like what was going on in that person's career at that time. My dad—yeah, same.

And conversations at cookouts were like stuff like that. Or like people being excited when a record they haven't heard in a while comes on. And like it's just vibey, you know? Good times. Hot dogs, hamburgers, beer. *(Chuckles.)*

Jesse Thorn: Is this Brooklyn?

Yaya Bey: Queens.

(Jesse confirms.)

Long Island. Like, sometimes— Actually, sometimes Brooklyn too, depending if we was at my auntie's house, you know.

Jesse Thorn: Did your dad rap in front of you? Your dad was a—had a career as a rapper, as Grand Daddy IU. His like first record came out, I think, the year you were born or something. Right about the year you were born.

Yaya Bey: Did he rap in front of me? Yeah. *(Laughs.)* Yeah, absolutely. Like, I grew up in a studio with him, like him rapping, him making beats for other people who were rapping. Like, I saw all—yeah, I saw all of that. Yeah.

Jesse Thorn: Was it his job?

Yaya Bey: Was it his job?

Jesse Thorn: Yeah. I mean, like did he also—

Yaya Bey: Oh, like did he have another job?

Jesse Thorn: Yeah. Did he also work at the grocery store? At the advertising agency, or something? Or—?

Yaya Bey: Mm-mm. No, just that was it. Yeah. He made beats for people. He rapped. By the time I was like aware that he was a rapper, I don't think he was making money anymore from rapping. But he was still making money from producing. And he would like, you know, get a lump sum from like, “Oh, I did some music for like *NBA Y2—*”, something.

[00:25:00]

Jesse Thorn: *NBA 2K*, yeah, sure.

Yaya Bey: You know what I mean? Or like, “Oh, I did a beat for KRS-One.” You know what I mean? So, like he would get checks from that, but I don't think he was like making money as a rapper anymore, but still a producer.

Jesse Thorn: Did you think it was cool?

Yaya Bey: Yeah! It was cool. He was the coolest.

Jesse Thorn: I mean, he was a cool guy. Like, that was part of his public persona was being a cool guy. (*Chuckles.*) You know what I mean? Like, he wore a suit in his videos and stuff. Carried a cane.

Yaya Bey: Yeah, he was cool. He was cool in real life. He was funny, you know? And he rubbed off on people, you know? Like, if you were around him for a while, you would pick up some of his slang. You know, you could always tell like who knew him, 'cause people talk like him. Like, they start saying the things he's saying. And like—

Jesse Thorn: What's an example?

Yaya Bey: Oh, I don't know. (*Laughs.*) But you know, like he— Yeah, he was a cool guy, for sure.

Jesse Thorn: Did you think that you wanted to go into the music industry? Like, did your dad being in the business make it seem appealing or less appealing?

Yaya Bey: Appealing, just in the fact that I wanted to make music. But it definitely— The industry definitely seemed scary. But like just, you know, being worried about people's business practices and things like that. But making the music was always appealing.

Jesse Thorn: I read he thought you should be a songwriter.

Yaya Bey: Yeah. (*Chuckles.*) Yeah. He didn't want me to like... but it didn't work out that way, you know?

Jesse Thorn: Do you think that you ended up on stage just because the songs you were writing and the music you were making was... too much “you” to be somebody else's? You know what I mean?

Yaya Bey: Uhh... yeah, maybe.

Jesse Thorn: Like, I have a hard time imagining you passing off, you know, something that you've written—even something with a beat on it already, like a demo—and being like, “Yeah, Faith Evans, can you record this one?” (*Laughs.*) You know what I mean?

Yaya Bey: Yeah. I mean, I am very like attached to what I'm doing, especially as time goes on. I feel like the more time goes on, the more like personal the records become.

Music: “choice” from the album *do it afraid* by Yaya Bey.

I tried to be real with myself

Sometimes I hit a wall when I can't deal with myself

I found the source of pain, I thought I'd heal it myself

I sparked a jay, and then that revealed to myself

I ain't been real with myself

I ain't been

Having talks with God

‘Cause what He took away

I miss my dad.

I miss my mom

The friends that couldn't stay

Stomach the loss, but it feels blasphemous to say

I'm mad at God

But I still choose to trust him anyway

Still choose to trust Him anyway

Still choose to trust Him...

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: You also have a relatively unique career shape, in that you've been making music your whole life. But I think it's largely in your 30s that you have been able to fully dedicate your life to making music. Like, you know. Like, make your money touring and selling records.

Was it something that you always expected to get to, or was it a surprise when it happened?

Yaya Bey: I always expected it. It was still a surprise though too, if that makes sense. Like, it's the only thing I ever wanted to do. You know, like when I was little, there was like a quick second— Me and my dad used to watch basketball together. We used to watch like Cynthia Cooper all the time, and my dad used to be like, “Man, she's such a good basketball player.” And my grandma used to live across the street from this boy who used to play basketball all the time, like religiously. And I used to like copy him, and I thought I wanted to be like in the WNBA. But that lasted like two summers, and then that was just ridiculous. Like, I was never gonna be an athlete. That was a crazy thought.

But besides that, like this—you know. I do other things, you know. Like, I make collages, and I have other things that I do for fun. You know, I might curate an art show, blah, blah, blah. But like... I mean, and those are things that I feel happy when I do, I feel passionate about when I do. But ultimately I wanna make an album. Like, no matter what else I might do, I always for sure wanna make an album. You know? So, I guess in that way, I wasn't surprised.

[00:30:00]

‘Cause it’s what I had always been hoping for and wishing for and praying for. And even when it was like really, really hard, I could never find it in me to quit on it. So, in that way, I guess it's like, “Well, if I never, ever give up, something's gotta work.” Then also, like when it started to work I was like, “Oh my god,” *(laughs.)* at the same time. So, yeah.

Jesse Thorn: I mean, you had grown up in a house where like your dad put out his records when he was like—his major label records when he was like 21 years old or something like

that, and had made a career in music for decades afterwards without being a famous person. Like, it's not—he wasn't the kind of— You know, he's certainly a respected rapper, but like not the kind of guy that had a hit record that he could go on package tours when he was in his 40s, like Vanilla Ice does or whatever.

So, you had seen that there's a way to like make a life in music that's beyond just having a smash hit when you're 22.

Yaya Bey: Yeah. I mean, I don't think that there were a lot of examples of like, “Okay, you can be in your 30s and be doing this thing.” You know? I think now—kids that are coming up now have that on many different levels. You know? Like, Victoria Monét is my age, you know? And like Lucky Daye’s my age, or like Muni Long, or like Caroline Polachek. You know, like there are people—there are examples of it now. But it wasn't like that when I was coming up. Especially not for women. Women get thrown away a little bit earlier.

But I think— I don't think I had a choice. Like, I had given so much of my life to it that I had to just see it through. 'Cause you know, like life takes prepping. And I had only ever prepped for this. There are days when it's really, really hard still. And it is like, “You in it now, girl. So, you might as well just see it through.”

Jesse Thorn: We'll finish up with Yaya Bey in just a minute. Stay with us. It's *Bullseye* from [MaximumFun.org](https://www.maximumfun.org) and NPR.

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Promo:

Music: Fantastical, medieval style synth.

Griffin McElroy: *(With a wise, aged affect.)* The wizards answer eight by eight.

The conclaves call to demonstrate—

Their arcane gift; their single spell.

They number 64—until!

A conflagration! 63.

And 62, they soon shall be,

As one by one, the wizards die,

‘Til one remains to reign on high!

(The music picks up tempo.)

(Returning to his normal speaking voice.) Join us for *TAZ Royale*, an Oops, All Wizards battle royale season of *The Adventure Zone*, every other Thursday on MaximumFun.org or wherever you get your podcasts.

(Music ends.)

Transition: Thumpy synth with a syncopated beat.

Jesse Thorn: This is *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. I'm talking with singer and songwriter Yaya Bey. Her new album, *do it afraid*, just dropped this past summer.

You had worked a lot on music with your first husband. So, when you got divorced from your first husband, it feels like part of the process of you making your own career in the music industry was being like, “Oh, I'm single. I'm divorced. And I'm not with him anymore, not making records with him anymore, and I have to figure out 100% what my deal is in the music industry and making records.”

Yaya Bey: I mean, yeah. I had to start all over. But I got to start all over and sound more like myself. I didn't have somebody that was like doubting me and hovering over me, and I didn't have to like second guess what I was doing. I could just do what I wanted to do. And I started making music from like a much more empowered place, because I didn't have that around. And sure, it was harder. But once I got a groove, I was like better.

[00:35:00]

And like *Madison Tapes* is the album that I made completely independent of him. And it's the album that you can really hear what I sound like.

Music: “I got a promotion and I still miss you” from the album *Madison Tapes* by Yaya Bey.

We last made love on a Sunday

Carry your scent with me Monday

We never get to work on time

I never get you off my mind

See 'bout me, baby

See 'bout me, babe

Get lost in me, babe

Get deep in me, baby

See 'bout me, baby

'Cause I've been spending my life on a paycheck

I been spending my life on a paycheck, hey

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: That album started as an EP, right? Just like a you-in-your-house kind of deal.

Yaya Bey: Yeah, it was supposed to be an EP. I was just trying to get like management and just trying to figure that out. Like, 'cause I ended up signing to Ninja Tune anyway, but Ninja Tune had reached out before—like, Ninja Tune proper. 'Cause I ended up signing like Big Data. And it didn't work out. Like, they just never followed up. And I was like, “I'm going to get that deal again.” *(Chuckles.)* And so, I was like, “I'm gonna get this EP, and I'm gonna get a manager, and I'm gonna figure it out.”

And then the world shut down. So, I was like, “Well, I might as well just elongate this into an album.” And that's how it turned into an album, 'cause I had time to make it an album.

Jesse Thorn: I mean, it's like a lot of things at once, right? Because you're relatively freshly divorced. You're dealing with COVID and the world. You're 30. *(Laughs.)* You know, you're like turning 30. You're making your own music by yourself for almost the first time.

That is 17 different things at the same time. And what's amazing about it is that it worked. Like, it totally worked out. Like, you did it! You dealt with all those things at once, and it came out for the better.

Yaya Bey: Yeah. Man, that was such a scary time in my life. I was so scared every day that I was not gonna be able to get through it. Like, 'cause it was a— You know, I had to move back home to New York, and I was unemployed, and I was kind of couch surfing, and I was

going through a million things, and I couldn't see my way through it. But I just kind of was like, "Get a job, get a place. Make a demo, get a manager." Like, every day I would wake up, and I was like, "This is what I have to do." And I just like did it in that order. Like, okay, get a job, get a place, make a demo, get a manager.

And I did those things. And then the world shut down, and I had a manager. I remember I had my first face-to-face meeting with them the day it was declared like, "Okay, this is a global pandemic." And I was working with them just like over FaceTime, and I made the album. And I won a grant, and I used that money to pay for PR for *Madison Tapes*. And we just worked that album, and then I got a deal. And then from that deal, I already had an EP that I was trying to make an album. So, I came to the label with an EP. We put that EP out. Then I worked on *Remember Your North Star*. We put that out, and then we just kept going. You know?

Jesse Thorn: What was the first one of those songs that you remember making by yourself/for yourself that you felt like, "This is it; this is the right thing"?

Yaya Bey: "paterson plank". And then probably on *Remember Your North Star*, "street fighter blues".

Music: "street fighter blues" from the album *Remember Your North Star* by Yaya Bey.

You say love me, so

Why would you let me go?

I'm floating in the wind

Seems I can never win

Somebody roll me a joint

Quick, let me get to the point

Girl, won't you read the room?

(Music fades out.)

Yaya Bey: One of the first songs on *Remember Your North Star* that I made that I was like, “Okay, I know what this album sounds like. You know, I know what this is supposed to be.” And I just kept going in the direction that I like could always hear myself going, you know?

[00:40:00]

If I just could get the resources, have the time, yada, yada. You know?

Jesse Thorn: Do you think that having been through the process of the last five or six years—having been through making music on your own, COVID, your father passing, all these different things, and finding success in so doing—like, in passing through all that stuff, finding yourself more successful than ever—has given you any comfort or security? Do you feel like “I have learned that I can do this”?

Yaya Bey: Yeah. Maybe just recently. I think I've been like just trying to survive; that it's been hard to take note when I'm thriving, because it's just been turbulent. (*Chuckles.*) But I didn't even think I was gonna make it this far. And I mean, if I wanna keep this thing up, I still got a lot further to go. So, I'm just trying to be okay, just trying to like keep my head down, make my music, do my thing, try to find some work/life balance, some peace of mind, some joy, and just try to stay consistent. You know?

Jesse Thorn: What's your best life-day as opposed to a work-day?

Yaya Bey: Oh, good food, a good show, maybe go for a good walk, get some boba. That's it, really.

Jesse Thorn: Yeah, shoutout to boba. Boba is great. (*Laughs.*)

Yaya Bey: It's so good. It's so good.

Jesse Thorn: I'm so glad boba stuck around and then came back around. (*Laughs.*)

Yaya Bey: Yeah. Boba is so good. Yeah.

Jesse Thorn: Well, Yaya, I'm so grateful for your time. It's so nice to get to talk to you.

Yaya Bey: Yeah. Thanks for having me.

Jesse Thorn: Yaya Bey. Let's go out on one more song from *do it afraid*, which is her new album. This song is called “dream girl”.

Music: “dream girl” from the album *do it afraid* by Yaya Bey.

Your little—

Strutting in pumps

Pulling the stunts

I know you want to

Give it to me all night long

Dream girl

I know I turn you on

Dream girl

You wanna take me home

Dream girl

I'm like your favorite song

Dream girl

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

Jesse Thorn: That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye*, 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. Hopefully you didn't hear, but they're hitting those hydraulic wrenches pretty hard at the tire yard that's next to my house.

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, Daniel Speer. We get booking help from Mara Davis. All our interstitial music comes from our friend Dan Wally, also known as DJW. You can find his music at [DJWsounds.bandcamp.com](https://www.djwsounds.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.

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:

Dream girl

Dream girl

Dream girl

Give it to me all night

We gon' have a long night

Do it 'til the neighbors wanna fight me

(Music fades out.)

(ADVERTISEMENT)

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