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(ADVERTISEMENT)

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. Diallo Riddle is a writer and actor. He created “Slow Jam the News” on *Late Night with Jimmy Fallon*. He appeared as an actor on *Silicon Valley*. And he and his creative partner—Bashir Salahuddin—created the wonderful television programs *Sherman's Showcase* and *South Side*. Diallo’s podcasting partner is Blake “LUXXURY” Robin. That's luxury spelled with two Xs. He's a record producer and DJ with a special talent for breaking down how and why hit songs are hit songs, especially when those hit songs have samples and breakbeats. He runs a TikTok and Instagram page where he does just that. Between the two platforms, he's got almost 1,000,000 followers.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Clip:

Music: Pleasant, relaxed piano.

LUXXURY: There are many ways musicians borrow from other songs to make new ones. One is interpolation.

Sound Effect: (*Whispered.*) Interpolation...

LUXXURY: Which is when you use an element of a song, but not the recording itself.

Music: “Please, Mr. Postman” by the Marvelettes.

Oh yes, wait a minute Mr. Postman

(The song warps and skips, speeding up until it becomes—)

Music: “Feel It Still” by Portugal. The Man from the album *Woodstock*.

Ooh, I'm a rebel just for kicks now

(Both lines play in unison, their melodies matching flawlessly.)

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Jesse Thorn: Diallo and LUXXURY teamed up to create a wonderful podcast, one of my favorites. It's called *One Song*. On every episode, LUXXURY, Riddle, and sometimes a guest dive deep into one song from the history of popular music. And by deep, I mean very, very deep. They get the stems of the record—that's the original instrumental tracks—and break it down piece by piece. The lyrics, the chords, the samples, the microphones they used, the unsung heroes, the bassist on the record.

Just the other day, I was listening to an episode that was about one of my favorite disco records of all time: Sylvester's "Mighty Real". Which is, you know, as good as it gets. But I had never heard it without the big, loud disco drums, which—of course—are essential for a disco album. But when they stripped them away, and I heard the percussion, and the other rhythm tracks, the piano, and the electric piano; I couldn't believe how syncopated and funky they were and what an incredible compliment they were to those straight-ahead, four-on-the-four disco drums. That's the kind of magic trick that they pull off all the time on *One Song*.

And it's that kind of music expertise, that kind of in-depth obsession, that makes them a shoo-in for this next segment. It's one we like to do every once in a while. It's called "Canonball".

Transition: "Canonball" by the Breeders, a funky guitar track which ends with a series of cheers and a splash of water.

Jesse Thorn: On "Canonball", our guests induct one record from the history of popular music into the canon. They make a case for why one album is truly great. Now, this is a true story. They picked the album, and they emailed us what it was. And I went over to my wife in my kitchen when I saw, and I said, "Hey honey, you know that music podcast I've been listening to a lot while I'm cooking? You're not gonna believe what album they picked to do on *Bullseye*."

And she immediately said, "Uh, Digable Planets' *Blowout Comb*?" Because she knows what my favorite albums of all time are.

So, here's some background. Digable Planets were and are three MCs: Ishmael Butler, "Butterfly"; Mariana Vieira, "Ladybug Mecca"; and Craig Irving, "Doodlebug". If you're a casual music fan, you probably remember Digable Planet's first album, and particularly its breakout single, "Cool Like Dat".

Music: “Rebirth of Slick (*Cool Like Dat*)” from the album *Reachin’ (A New Refutation of Time and Space)*.

But I’m cool like that

I’m cool like that

I’m cool like that

I’m cool like that

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: This was a huge hit. It won them a Grammy. It was the talk of the town. And it reflected this idea that hip-hop wasn't just, you know, whatever people were imagining—angry inner-city youths or whatever. Actually, it was cool jazz stuff. Which you know, is actually true. It wasn't just that.

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But it was obviously kind of problematic and judgmental and a pretty basic understanding of hip-hop culture. So, when Digable sat down to make a second record, they decided to push everything much, much further. They'd always been socially minded. They decided to get full-on philosophical communist. And then when they put it out? Nobody bought it. And for a long time, that was the end of Digable Planets. But I'll tell you this much. I bought that record when I was 13 years old. I bought it on CD. And I listened to it over and over and over and over and over. As much as I had liked their first album, I knew the second album was a whole order of magnitude better: the best hip-hop record I had ever heard.

Anyway, enough from me about *Blowout Comb*. Here's Diallo and LUXXURY.

Diallo Riddle: I'm Diallo Riddle.

LUXXURY: I'm LUXXURY.

Diallo Riddle: And we're here to talk about *Blowout Comb*. Byyy...

LUXXURY: Digable Planets.

(Music fades in.)

Diallo Riddle: Why did we choose this album? I think it was one of the first hip-hop albums that LUXXURY and I have figured out we both have in our super high—you know, top ten/top five.

But in addition to that, it's just one of those great albums that like was not huge at the time, but then when you meet somebody who it was also on their radar, you're like, (*whisper shouting*) “You like that too?!” Like, you know, I know people from electro music and punk. I know one very serious punk who he always points to this as his favorite album of the 1990s. Like, it's got an appeal among a very diverse group of people.

Music: “Slowes’ Comb / The May 4th Movement Starring Doodlebug” from the album *Blowout Comb* by Digable Planets.

Seven times for pleasure

I don't trip, I don't trip

We don't trip, nah, we don't trip.

We don't trip, please don't trip

We don't trip (Pleasure)

Flash! Flash! Flash, Flash, Flash!

Now, 16 times for the mind thieves

For my thinking in dilemma...

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

LUXXURY: I'd say it's inherently good in and of itself, but also there's an enhanced goodness to it that comes from it being lesser-known and kind of the sleeper, like you're describing it. The fact that, over the years, it is kind of an under-the-radar thing. And when you meet somebody else—like you mentioned—who likes it, it's that much more special. 'Cause you're not talking about like, you know, Nirvana, *Nevermind*. Okay. Everyone likes that.

(Diallo laughs.)

It's a little bit more, you know, deep cut.

Music:

For giving birth to horn loopers

I took my first step with Panthers, born troopers

Got caps on both cans for the halls I spray

Slap hands with my mans by the walls we play

Now, now...

(Music fades out.)

Diallo Riddle: I didn't realize how close this arrives on the heels of *Reachin' . Reachin' ,* being such a popular, sort of mainstream hip-hop album at the time that it came out—at a time when hip-hop didn't always produce mainstream albums.

Music: “Rebirth of Slick (*Cool Like Dat*)” by Digable Planets.

We be to rap what key be to lock

But I'm cool like that

I'm cool like that

I'm cool like that

I'm cool like that

I'm cool like that

I'm cool like that

I'm cool like that

I'm cool (Cool)

We be the chocolates taps on my raps

She innovates at the...

(Music fades out.)

Diallo Riddle: But this album, *Blowout Comb*, came out literally just one-and-a-half— It's not a full two years later. Both they as a group, and also hip-hop as a genre, so much had happened in the intervening year and a half that, you know, you wouldn't expect them to come back with a similar album. And they really didn't. Like, this album is so different, and it's tucked so firmly in the mid-'90s hip-hop.

(Exciting, jazzy funk fades in.)

LUXURY: Yeah, these are big years. Every year, something major happens. And you're right, just one year later, the jazzy thing, if you will—like what Q-Tip had been doing. And on *Reachin'*, they were doing themselves; Digable were doing on their first record. And to Grammy winning success, I believe.

(Diallo confirms.)

I think they won—was it Best Single? While it is jazz samples, there are '70s dusty, incredibly well-chosen, two-bar loops across the album. They are integrated with live instrumentation. And the vocals—you used the word tucked before. I always think about that with this record. The vocals are tucked in. And they are more of another sound than they are like a front-and-center rap album. It's not rap—like, the delivery of the lyrical content, in other words, is different than it tends to be in hip-hop. It's more of another instrument, another sound.

Music: “Dog It” from the album *Blowout Comb* by Digable Planets.

In the mist, with a fist

Proletariat, Cad-i-lac steering it

Fro soul, gold Panther crew, grab our poppers

Now, I'm making bacon

Still saying wa as-salaamu alaykum

Fresh joints, we make 'em like water

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

Diallo Riddle: Can I just say? For me—I mean, like I love the whole album.

[00:10:00]

But to me, this album really gets started on track three, which is “Dog It”; which is the one where I think they sampled The Last Poets. Because from that point on, the song’s almost like in a DJ way, almost like The Avalanches’ *Since I Left You*. They really do blend cinematically from one song into the next in a way that just—I don't know— If we move entirely away from albums, like generations are gonna forget how much it means to like be taken on a cinematic album journey.

Music:

In Fort Green on diamond back is where I'm at

Feeling da funk (da funk) that's in the trunk (the trunk)

I feel the funk (da funk), feeling the funk (da funk)

I'm feeling funk (da funk); I'm in the trunk (da trunk)

Feeling da funk (da funk), I am the funk

(Music fades out.)

Diallo Riddle: You know, “The Art of Easing”, which is one of my favorite songs on here, samples Bobbi Humphrey's, “Blacks and Blues”.

Music: “The Art of Easing” from the album *Blowout Comb* by Digable Planets.

Smooth

(Smooth!)

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

Diallo Riddle: Beautiful song, gorgeously sampled here. There's definitely like a '70s influence on that song, and yet I think it's wholly jazz. I would love to pull Ishmael Butler aside at some point, if I ever get the chance to meet him, and just say, “Hey, man. It's cool, because we love what you did.” And I can't agree more. Like, I think this album is just as jazzy as the first, it's just— It's a darker shade of jazz. It's a darker shade. They went towards a darker place.

Music:

Limping past the projects

Seen my man, a'ight?

Steelo type fat, solar type facts

Later for milk and honey, get the money out this piece

Relax (Relax!)

I handle streets, all type, slick

Just like a seven, no lash

She got moist

'Cause I gots the platinum voice

Like syrup, for delf roaming the New York boroughs

As they temp our perms...

(Music fades out.)

Diallo Riddle: I mean, they've said it in contemporary articles. He was like—he loved hip-hop so much that he felt like to be a rapper was to spend some time in New York. So, he went there specifically and found Brooklyn specifically, because he wanted to be a part of that culture. Before he records this album, Ish spends some time with some distant family and friends in Watts. You know, and that's where he's like, you know, paying closer attention to what he's sampling.

The vibe that I got even then—even before I knew that a lot of New Yorkers were like, “Who are these guys?”—that he really wanted to be accepted into that scene, just from the fact that he moves to Fort Green; he's got songs with Guru and Jeru. And you know, it just—it felt like he really wanted to be accepted.

(Thumpy pleasant music fades in.)

LUXURY: It really does that special thing that more listens require you to keep listening. You don't really get tired of it. And it's also the sequential part of it, when—if you put on one song, you're gonna have to listen to the end, and then come back and get to where you left off. And going back to the sequencing thing we were talking about, that— Probably my favorite song is “9th Wonder”, which is the second to last song. Which means the entire time I'm listening, I'm always a little bit looking forward to getting to that song. And I'm a little impatient, but not too impatient, 'cause the current song is also great. Then you finally get to “9th Wonder”, and then it's done, and then you have to stay for “For Corners.” Which it fades seamlessly into. And that's a seven-minute loop of just— It's one of the most perfect two-bar loops I've ever heard in my life. It's so scrumptious.

Music: “For Corners” from the album *Blowout Comb* by Digable Planets.

Brooklyn got the funk

Uptown got the funk

East, West, North side got the funk

L.A. got the funk

Boogie Down got the funk

Queens do got the funk

The Bottom got the funk

We got the funk

I'm high as the wind so I blow minds

Curb hanging and hopping at the oracle of hipster

Just like Black Caesar, my depths are fresh...

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

LUXXURY: There's different ways that the human voice can affect us, right? Even when it's used as an instrument. If it is a little bit softer, both in the actual mixing—as we were talking about it—but also just, their delivery was already on the softer side of things. It was on the sort of kinder, gentler side of things. When I listen to this record, it really does wash over me as a complete sonic experience and less of “I'm receiving a message that's being delivered by lyrics.” And the whole thing comes across a little bit in my mind as a soundtrack that allows every listener to maybe have a different film in front of them.

For me, that film has some of a '70s Brooklyn. It has a lot of vague and yet clear things that are probably accurate to the intent, but it doesn't have— It's wonderfully more like a dream than it is like a *(unclear)*.

Diallo Riddle: I was gonna say, it feels very dreamy.

LUXXURY: Very dreamy. Yes.

Diallo Riddle: Very dreamy.

Music:

My universal fam's got stamina

Polar bears in fear when we step in the arena

Three-six-oh, C-Know simply cycling

Firm as a rock, print the god when I'm building blocks

(Music fades out.)

Diallo Riddle: Let's do a little bit of “9th Wonder” when it kicks in. When the baseline kicks in.

Music: “9th Wonder” from the album *Blowout Comb* by Digable Planets.

We lounge, stay phat, notice our G limp

Our natural flair, with our fresh-ass hair

Style baggy, out, clout, slick

Creamy and fresh, East Coast to West

Brooklyn...

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

Diallo Riddle: There's a James Brown drum loop, when the—

[00:15:00]

LUXXURY: —after the JBS thing.

Diallo Riddle: —Ohio Players' interpolation kicks in.

Music:

(Making money)

I'm slicker this year, I'm slicker this year

Myrtle Ave, A-train, got the pick in my hair

And what? Sixteen joints later, still lounge

Fresh, from Flatbush in my baggy boosted Guess

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

LUXXURY: When that James Brown breakbeat kicks in, and it's got the like love roller coaster baseline interpolated—it's not samples on top.

Diallo Riddle: I just realized that's love rollercoaster right there. I knew that it sounded familiar. I did not—

(LUXXURY starts humming the melody.)

Yeah!

LUXXURY: That's musical perfection to me.

Music:

Hanging like bats, 'cause the 12-inch wax say, "Scorpio"

And my hair say, "'Fro"

And my blood say, "Bro"

My clique say, "Ayyo"

Make sparks from the barrel...

(Music fades out.)

Diallo Riddle: I think it's important to remember that we shouldn't always measure art by how many copies it sold. You know? There was nothing more depressing than talking to somebody younger than me—not even that much younger! But you know, having this debate about, you know, these two artists. And a lot of times he would come back with, “Well, so and so sold more.”

And I'm like, "WHO cares?"

And he is like, "Well, it was clearly connecting with more people."

But I think it's so important that we not judge art by the commerce. Everybody sounds like they work in the sales department at a record label! Like, let's not judge music and artists by how much they sell. Let's see what stands the test of time.

LUXURY: I really received this record, a rap record with vocals on it, as a complete sonic experience. And that's why it's lasted so long. It's why I pull it off my shelves and put it on the turntable so often, because it creates a mood, and it emotionally affects me and makes me happy and washes over me like a warm bath; because of how it sounds. Now, if I wanna rock out, and I wanna like get my energy pumping, then I'll put on *Master of Puppets* or Nirvana, whatever it is.

(Diallo laughs.)

There's an emotional reaction that every record's going to give you, and I think sometimes we forget that like that goes into our selection of what we're wanting to listen to in the moment. For me, this is giving me a sonic bath. I can't think of any other way to put it.

(A pleasant, funky track fades in.)

Diallo Riddle: This album feels like it was made in one studio, just a few people sitting around the boards and coming up with something entirely special. I mean, it does have features by two of my favorite rappers from the '90s. But— And I don't know the backstory here, but it does feel a little bit like, "Hey, reach out to that person's label, pay them a little money. Maybe that'll buy us a little bit more of the New York cred that we want." And in my opinion, deserve.

But no, you don't even get the sense that they weighed in on the album as much as just Digable Planets had an idea and a thought and an aesthetic, and it feels like a complete project from—you know—top to bottom. And you just— A part of me wishes that the culture could have moved in the direction of this album, musically. But that's not what happened. And I think it's okay, because the good news is that we still have— You know, we have the vinyl, we have the CDs, we have the MP3s, and it's never too late to open up the book again.

Music: "Jetty" from the album *Blowout Comb* by Digable Planets.

Yeah, but we straight up

Funky

Ease back...

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

Jesse Thorn: Diallo Riddle and LUXXURY, Blake Robin, on the song they'd induce into the canon of popular music: Digable Planets' *Blowout Comb* from 1994. It is a classic.

If you haven't heard Diallo and LUXXURY's podcast, *One Song*, it is my favorite music podcast. I love listening to it.

Look, I mentioned how great that episode about "Mighty Real", the Sylvester song, is. Whether or not you have any interest in disco or Sylvester or funk or queer music history or whatever, start with that episode. It was so wonderful. You can find their show by searching for *One Song* on YouTube or your favorite podcast app.

(Music fades out.)

Transition: Funky synth with light vocalizations.

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 HQ—overlooking beautiful MacArthur Park in Los Angeles, California. Now here is—I've reached the part of the script where we usually just say something that someone saw out the window at our office, because stuff is always happening out our window. But right here it says, "Let's go Dodgers." If you ever needed proof that I did not write this script... my script says, "Let's go Dodgers." And also, five clap emojis. It's five more clap emojis than I have to offer the Los Angeles Dodgers. Go Giants in their final three games of the season, against the Rockies.
(Laughs.)

[00:20:00]

Our show is produced by speaking into microphones, our senior produce—I'll root for the Yankees if they're playing the Dodgers.

Our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producers are Jesus Ambrosio and Richard Roby. All too many of them are Dodgers fans. Our production fellow at Maximum Fun is Hannah Moroz. I don't know who she roots for. Our video producer is Daniel Speer. I'm about 99% sure that he does not have a favorite baseball team. 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://djwsounds.bandcamp.com). Our theme music was written and recorded by the band 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. 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.)

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