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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. LaRussell has a record called “I'm From the Bay”. It's sort of a mission statement.

Music: “I'm From the Bay” by LaRussell and Lil John.

I'm from the Bay (I'm from the Bay)

I rep it hard (I rep it hard)

I'm known worldwide, but I grew up from my backyard

(From my backyard!)

I'm from the Bay (He's from the Bay)

That's Northern Cal (That's Northern Cal)

They like my songs, they like my smile, they like my style

Let's go!

This ain't nothing you ain't heard before

I put a new twist on the stuff from '06

This ain't nothing you ain't heard before...

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: LaRussell hails from Vallejo. That's in the East Bay in Northern California—the same town that gave birth to E-40, Mac Dre, and Sly Stone. It's a place where there is an expectation that you will DIY your music, rep your hood, and most of all: be fun. You could call LaRussell's music post-hyphy. It's bouncy, cheerful, even a little bit silly sometimes—but also serious as a heart attack. Does that make sense? If you were making a historical chart, the line would go back to Mac Dre, then to E-40 through Digital Underground, all the way to Too Short in the mid-1980s.

LaRussell's music is also community music. Like, it's music that's made to get people together at a side show with cars doing donuts at an intersection or just in LaRussell's mom's backyard, where he has had an incredible series of concerts. This is a guy who tours with a literal choir. And he is also fiercely independent, selling his own records, his own merch, his own concert tickets—often at pay-what-you-want prices. Very, very successfully, I should add. And all those good vibes, as far as I can tell, they are for real. You won't be able to see this since this is radio, but at one point we played a clip of LaRussell's song "I Got Flavor", and he—like, behind a microphone, wearing his headphones—danced his way through the whole thing. Anyway. Let's start things off with a recent single from LaRussell. This one's called "Am I Blurry".

Music: "Am I Blurry" by LaRussell.

I can sell anything that you put in my hands (yes)

The whole kitchen, not just pots and pans

You ever spent 50 bands on the ad campaign?

(No)

No? Then we are not the same

A broke—hating don't affect me none

It's money outside; go and make you some

Ain't gotta eat off my plate, I'll make you one

You can hang with a star, that don't make you one

Am I blurry, or did I make myself clear?

(Music fades out.)

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

LaRussell: Gratitude, mutual. Grateful to be here.

Jesse Thorn: I am thrilled, not only because you're a guest on the program, but because I was just looking at your YouTube channel like 20 minutes ago. And the last video you put out is five blocks from where I grew up. So, shout out to the Bay Area. Shout out to San Francisco's handsome, historic mission district. We love to see it in music videos, not just that one video for Third Eye Blind from like 20 years ago.

LaRussell: (*Laughs.*) Right.

Jesse Thorn: You're from Vallejo, LaRussell. It's a city of about 100,000 people in the East Bay, but it's not one that folks who are from outside the Bay Area might be familiar with. So, how would you describe it?

LaRussell: I would describe it as all of your favorite Bay Area cities in one.

Jesse Thorn: Alright! Tell me about it.

LaRussell: That's the best way to put it. Vallejo is one of the most diverse cities in America, and it's a gumbo pot of everyone who moved from every other city, plus our originators, in one. You know, my family migrated in from Oakland. We have people who migrated in from Richmond. We have San Franciscans; we have Berkeley; we have Pinole. Then we have people from Sacramento. Like, Vallejo is really a big melting pot of just Bay Area people and Bay Area culture.

Jesse Thorn: It's also a legendary music city. I mean, it's the home of E-40 and was the home of Mac Dre and was also the home of Sly Stone and Con Funk Shun in the late '70s/early '80s.

LaRussell: Gabi Wilson.

Jesse Thorn: Yeah. Is that something that you grew up kind of being aware of?

LaRussell: Yeah! You kind of had— Like, growing up in Vallejo, we have a huge sense of pride. And one of my best friends growing up, his grandfather—great grandfather, one of those—was a member of Con Funk Shun. So, I used to always hear it just kind of running up and down the block. You'll hear their music and hear him like, "Oh yeah, my grandpa's in a band."

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You know as kids you don't think nothing of it. But E-40 is a huge pioneer in Vallejo. Like, we love 40, we love H.E.R., we love Neftafer. We love our rappers. You know, we don't have a team. So, when we get rappers and athletes that make it from the city, those become our champions.

Jesse Thorn: Yeah, I think that's really true. And there's kind of an expectation in the Bay Area—especially in hip-hop—that you're gonna do it for yourself. That is self-evident, that nobody's gonna put you on; you're gonna do it for yourself.

LaRussell: You gonna have to. (*Chuckles.*)

Jesse Thorn: You started rapping full-time, professionally, relatively late in life. You know, hip-hop is a young person's game. And a lot of people either get put on when they're 17 years old, or they go get a job and only rap for fun on the side. You know what I mean? Tell me about what you did when you got out of high school and why you quit that to start rapping—or to start rapping as a full-time life?

LaRussell: Yeah, I was rapping then. I was rapping as a kid and in middle school and at 17. I had a child literally three months after I graduated high school. So, for me it was like I was instantly dumped into the real world. And I had to go to work, and I had to provide, and I had to figure out ways to be successful and find a means for myself and my child. So, that's what kind of added to my late start. But even through all that, as I was working for the UPSs and the FedExes and the wineries and the aerospace industry, I was always making, creating, and writing music—you know—in the back of my mind. I just didn't get to prioritize it, because I didn't know how possible it was. You know? So, I didn't have the full amount of confidence to bet on myself just yet.

Jesse Thorn: What gave you that confidence?

LaRussell: Success. Repetition. Putting things into the world and seeing results. Results gave me that confidence. After I released music and I seen it being received—well, it's like, "Huh! Okay. I could go forward." After I threw my first show and I seen ticket sales, like "Huh! I could go forward." So, for me it was like real-world results from my efforts.

Jesse Thorn: When was the last time you had a job? A job-job.

LaRussell: 2019 was the last time I had a job.

Jesse Thorn: What gave you the courage to quit—or if it went down a different way—not to get another job after you got fired?

LaRussell: I actually—I didn't get fired. I've never been fired. You know? I'm an incredible worker and leader. I have never been fired from a job ever. I've left every job I was at, because I wanted more for myself. But I had a period after I left my job in 2019—you know, we hustled for a few years and start growing the brand more. And then COVID hit. And you know, that stopped everything—live performances, live entertainment. And during that period, you know, I had to really consider—Like, I was in the red. I was down back to zero, and I had to really consider going to get a job. And I applied to CNH in Crockett. I went and did the interview and everything. And I got the job. I got accepted, and they wanted me there. And I just, um— You know, I chose to bet on me. It was one of those moments where I just went to apply to see if I could still do it.

And it taught me like, you know, I'll always be able to go get a job. But I won't always be able to chase my dreams.

Jesse Thorn: When your kid was born, what did you think your life was gonna be?

LaRussell: I didn't know. Honestly, at that time, I was just living. You know, I was just in it. I didn't have the comprehension of what life could fully be or what was capable or possible. You know, I grew up in an area where you're not really cultivated growing up. I was always a really smart kid, but I didn't have anyone pushing me to be greater than I was being and showing up in the world already.

Jesse Thorn: So, what did you do?

LaRussell: What do you mean?

Jesse Thorn: Well, if you couldn't see it, what was the one day at a time like?

(LaRussell "hm"s.)

I mean, I was terrified when I had kids, and I had kids when I was 10 years older than that. You know?

LaRussell: Yeah. You know, I really immersed myself in work. Like, every job I found, I was able to labor to the point of like unhealthiness. You know? Like, I was the double overtime, time and a half. I need all that. Holidays, regular days. Like, most of the jobs I worked at, I was working 10-to-14-hour shifts.

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And like, I really indulged myself in work and in making money during that time.

Jesse Thorn: What was the first verse you remember recording and feeling like you really got it right?

LaRussell: Hm. That's a great question. I didn't really release—Like, when I was in high school I was battling and dropping mixtapes. And then after high school, I stopped sharing music for about 4/5/6 years—like, really sharing music—until 2018 when I made *The Field Effect*. And that was the first time I really, really felt confident in my abilities.

Music: "Black Boy Joy" from the album *The Field Effect* by LaRussell.

I guess it's looking up

I came a long way from the block

I heard they couldn't wait till I dropped

Bloodline of a Panther

When God ain't have the answers

— all them doctors, 'cause I got rid of that cancer

I'm vegan, I'm godly, I'm winning at life

And I'm here to stay like I'm spending the night

And these ain't raps; I'm just giving advice

— think they heard it all, but now you hearing it twice

Drowning in that bottle, you pacifying your pain

I'm propagating the struggle

You wanna kill everything

How we supposed to grow?

You been going through some issues

Well, how we supposed to know?

'Cause all you rap about is clips

I'm trying to help you, though

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: And you're like in your 20s by then, right? I mean, you're a full-grown adult by the time you did that.

LaRussell: Yep. Yep. About 23 or 24.

Jesse Thorn: Did you worry that the ship had sailed?

LaRussell: No. You know, I didn't even think about the fact that I was like an older rapper in the game. I didn't think about it at all, because I've always had like a youthful spirit. I just kind of— You know, even now. Like, realizing that I'm 30 and I'm just now making it is like— You know how people used to talk about 2 Chainz? Like, "Man, he made it late in his 30s!" And it's like I'm that now! And you know, you never expect that. You expect to make it when you're in your early teens and 20s. But I'm 30, and I'm just now getting to this point of like beginning my career. So, no, I never paid attention to it until now.

Jesse Thorn: We've got more with LaRussell after the break, including an answer to a question that has always been on my mind: why do Bay Area rappers like to smile? Including my guest. I mean, I'm from the Bay. I'm smiling right now just thinking about it. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

Transition: Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

Jesse Thorn: Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is LaRussell. He's a rapper from the Bay Area who is constantly putting out new music. He has millions of followers on social media. Probably one of the most effortlessly charming MCs in the music business. Let's get back into our conversation.

When you were in your early 20s, did you imagine that the goal of rapping was to get signed?

LaRussell: Yes. Of course. Coming outta high school, first starting off, of course. That was like the only option. You know, it's like if you play basketball, the goal is to go to the NBA. If you play football, the goal is to go to the NFL. If you rap, the goal is to get signed.

Jesse Thorn: But I think you probably had more of an eye on something else than most people in that position at that age. I think when you grow up in the Bay, you always have in the back of your mind the idea "I can always sell this record out of the trunk."

LaRussell: Yeah. Especially for me, because that's how I started. I didn't know any other way. All of my first shows, I sold tickets by hand out my mom's garage. All of my first merch, you had to pull up to my mama's crib and buy it. We weren't even shipping merch. My first albums. These were all hand-to-hand sales. That was the way I knew how to distribute product. You know, I grew up watching my pops hustle, and that was all hand-to-hand sales. There was no other way to do it.

Jesse Thorn: Did you ever stand outside the record store?

LaRussell: Yeah! I used to— Man, it was really dope. When my pops used to grind, we used to go to the record store back then. Tuesdays was the release days, and then I think for a moment it was like Thursdays that were release days too. And we used to always go to Rasputin's and get all the new music and see who was in there. And you know, that's a really— That's an experience that like this new age of kids don't get no more.

Jesse Thorn: So, you're an age where I guess the first big wave of hip-hop that really came from the internet was happening when you were exactly the right age for it. I mean, like you're 30.

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15 years ago, you were 15; and 16 or 17 years ago you were 13—12/13. What did you learn from watching the Lil Bs and Soulja Boys and the folks who really cracked the idea of building an audience for hip-hop on the internet?

LaRussell: Man, everything. Like, subconsciously though—not even realizing that it was building a blueprint for me. You know, Black Star and Young Curt. Like, these were some where you can go on Myspace and hear all their music early. And then getting into like the Lil Wayne mixtape phase. Lil Wayne gave us soooo much music, but it was because we had the internet to access it. We never had to wait years to hear from him. He was always rapping and always giving it to us, and that's something that I've adopted in my journey now of just like going straight to the people and feeding the people.

Jesse Thorn: When you were a teenager were you mostly listening to—I guess it would've been hyphy and late period mob music? Or were you an underground hip-hop dork?

LaRussell: I had a pretty eclectic case. My CD case was filled with everything, from the hyphy movement in Bay Area music to Rick Ross and Kanyes and underground stuff that most people don't even know—the Chris Webbys. I consumed everything. Anything that I loved, I was consuming.

Jesse Thorn: A question for you. Do you think that Bay area hip-hop—not without exception, but speaking generally—is more cheerful than hip-hop from other places? Do you think it's a place where you're more likely to see a smile on an MCs face?

LaRussell: For certain. (*Chuckles.*)

Jesse Thorn: I ask you this 'cause you're one of the smiling-est rappers I'm familiar with. (*Laughs.*)

LaRussell: For certain. I definitely think that's the energy of Bay Area hip-hop. Like, when you go to the East Coast, especially back then, it was more like rugged and hard and like, you know, “We on the block, we—” You know, it was just a different energy. And then the South was kind of— The South was more like laid back and chill and like—you know, the cars and the dunks. And the Bay has always been energetic. Since Mac Dre, since The Jacka, it was always like energetic, flossing. Like, you know. We clean, and we know we clean, and that's the vibe of it. We enjoying ourself.

Jesse Thorn: Yeah, I mean this the sideshow—which is essential to especially the East Bay hip-hop culture—is like such a joyful party. Like, even when it's— You know, they can get aggro; there can be violence. But like, (*laughing*) even then, it's almost like a good times contest. You know what I mean?

LaRussell: Right! Right. People are enjoying they time and they moment. And yeah, I think that's reflective of just Bay Area culture in general. Even the people who aren't artists. Like, when you meet Bay Area people and they having a good day and feeling themselves, it's that energy.

Jesse Thorn: Do you ever worry that you are too cheerful-appearing for hip-hop? I mean, I watched your first appearance with Charlemagne tha God on radio in New York. You know, *Breakfast Club* is the biggest hip-hop radio show in the world, one of the biggest morning shows in the country. And you did like three songs in the freestyle part. And they were all pretty serious. And as I was watching them—I mean, I know you have serious records in your catalog. That wasn't a surprise to me. But as I was watching them, I thought, "Did LaRussell catch an airplane to LaGuardia and on the subway from the airport thought, "I'm in New York; I better bring serious bars"?

LaRussell: (*Laughs.*) Uh, not quite. I bring serious bars everywhere I go! (*Laughs.*) But that was a really special moment, 'cause it was my first big moment. And I always told myself when I get those moments, I'm going to make sure I say something of value or vital or important. So, for me, the stage was just too big to not give it what it deserved.

Jesse Thorn: How did you get that call?

LaRussell: Hovain actually set that up! During that time, Hovain was like co-managing me with Johnny Sipes and Stretch. And when I met Hovane, he was like, "Man, I sent yourself to Charlemagne. I'm finna get you on *Breakfast Club*."

And I didn't really believe him. I was just like, "Whatever."

And then he finally hit me and was like, "I'm finna connect y'all. We finna make this happen." And you know, that—I didn't even get an interview. I literally only came to rap.

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Like, Charlemagne heard the video Hovain had sent him, and it was like, "He needs to come rap." No one else goes on *Breakfast Club* and freestyles. That was just me, you know? And yeah, it was just one of those spur-of-the-moments. Like, everything aligned. It was a moment that was made for me specifically.

Music: "The Breakfast Club Freestyle", improvised live on *The Breakfast Club*.

Some new goals, some new— , some new crew

You know them, you know us and them too

You know who everybody is, but who you?

I ain't trying to preach, 'cause I hate that ish

But I see— dying, and I hate that ish

Smiling all the time, I gotta fake that ish

I hate '20 SHOTS'; why make that ish?

Sharing all this pain for the income I could gain

Great-Granny was a slave

Why would I ever cop a chain?

Gave us Band-Aids like that could ever stop the pain

—s used to hang for these songs that I sang

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: Were you scared?

LaRussell: Nah.

Jesse Thorn: For real?

LaRussell: Yeah, for real.

Jesse Thorn: I'd be scared right now if you put me on *The Breakfast Club*! If I went out to New York; I'm sitting there across from Charlemagne tha God, I'd be scared.

LaRussell: Yeah, that's you. I'm not you. I'm me. (*Chuckles.*)

Jesse Thorn: Alright. Were you excited? Were you just ready to go?

LaRussell: Yeah. I was really excited, and I had went to—I flew to New York probably like eight/nine—Like, I took all my friends, and my mom was there. Like, it was a really special moment. Like, I knew it would change my life if I did what I had to do.

Jesse Thorn: You said in that appearance too that you were in New York rolling 12 deep or something like that. Were you literally rolling—? Like, how many people did you bring with you?

LaRussell: Yeah, at least 10!

(Jesse laughs.)

It was a good amount of us out. Like, we took a picture while we— It was a good amount of us.

Jesse Thorn: Did you go to the Empire State Building or the Statue of Liberty?

LaRussell: No, we literally just flew in, went to do *Breakfast Club*, and flew home. I didn't have the budget to do nothing more. (*Laughs*.)

Jesse Thorn: How many people's airplane tickets did you buy? Everybody's?

LaRussell: Every single one.

Jesse Thorn: You've made a lot of sacrifices like that. Sacrifices that are investments. What's another example of something that you did that hurt but you knew was important for the long-term of your career?

LaRussell: Man, everything. Everything I do. I'm still in that position right now. You know, I am known for scaling things far before I get compensated to do it. Like, right now I have a show that sometimes spans up to 40 people. You know, a 20-piece choir, a six/seven-piece band, audio tecs, security, production staff. And I don't always— You know, my show fee isn't there yet. People don't pay me what I'm deserving of yet, but I have to show proof of concept. You know, I did Outside Lands, and they gave me 25 grand. And I'm here with 30/40 people who are like working and putting on this show. You know, that doesn't cover that cost at all. Bus, transportation, food, lodging. These are all things I take on in hopes that I could prove my concept worthy, and people would deem it worth—you know—what I want to charge at some point. But this has been my journey. My backyard! I've invested six figures into renovating my backyard to create a venue.

And that's just like the base of it. That's before I went and bought—I have concert speakers in my backyard. Like, state-of-the-art speakers that I've invested in, and snakes and mixers and— anything you will find in a big venue, I have it in my yard. All of that cost thousands. Cameras, video equipment, sound, lighting. Like, my entire career has been me in the red. (*Laughs*.) You know? To prove a concept, and knowing eventually, one day I'll make it to the green. You know? And I just keep that hope.

Jesse Thorn: How many shows have you put on in your backyard?

LaRussell: We're on year four now, and we do six a year minimum. So, 24 just off that. And I always do like little popup ones. So, say, maybe about 30? But prior to the backyard, I used to rehearse in my garage. That's how I first started going viral. And my whole neighborhood would hear me rehearse. They literally watched me go from this kid working a job, rehearsing in the garage after coming home from work to selling tickets, and now the block is full, and there's parking, and there's kids and jumpers. Like, my neighborhood have witnessed me become a star from my garage. They seen me do every step.

Jesse Thorn: I watched a video of you performing in your backyard with Juvenile. Who's the person who's come through that you've most had to pinch yourself over?

LaRussell: Juvenile. That was probably the one so far, just because he—

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I remember being a kid and watching 106 & Park and watching VH1. And Cash Money was a big thing in my house and just in hip-hop and in our culture. So, to see him there talking to my mother and talking to my cousins and taking pictures and chilling and— Like, that's a special, monumental moment that I never imagined. I never dreamed that was possible when I was growing up. I never even thought I would be famous. So, to have it right in front of me and be the one orchestrating it was just beyond special.

Music: “Ghetto Children” from the album *400 Degrees* by Juvenile.

Plotting on the way to make a mega-million, million

Up until then, I'ma be thugging behind the project building

Smoking that fire with the ghetto children

Plotting on the way to make a mega-million, million, lord

I'll ride every day of the week

You'll get your history when you're playing with me

I find out the spot that you sleep

Get with my— from the block and be Creed

Goldie Love cocking back...

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: What was it like for him there? It must have been a trip for him.

LaRussell: Man, he said it was one of his favorite shows. You know. He's performed in front of thousands of people, but there's no feeling and energy like performing in that backyard.

Jesse Thorn: We've got even more still to come with LaRussell. Stay with us. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

Promo:

Music: Exciting, playful sax.

Jesse Thorn: On *Judge John Hodgman*, the courtroom is fake, but the disputes are real.

(*Gavel bang.*)

Gumby Disputer: Brian would say, “I’m the Gumby of this family.” He’s just not!

Jesse Thorn: Claiming to be Gumby is an un-Gumby-like claim.

Brian: No, it’s just Gumby and I being our authentic selves.

(*Gavel bang.*)

John Hodgman: So, what’s your complaint? Too many sauces?

Sauce Litigant: There are no foods on which to put the sauces.

John Hodgman: Have we named all the sauces on the top shelf yet?

Sauce Enthusiast: (*Laughing.*) Not—not even close.

(*Gavel bang.*)

John Hodgman: You economize when it comes to pants.

Pants Plaintiff: Truly, it’s not about the cleanliness of the pants.

John Hodgman: Well, why isn’t it?! This is what I want to know!

(*Gavel bang.*)

John Hogman: *Judge John Hodgman*. Fake court, weird cases, real justice. On MaximumFun.org, YouTube, and everywhere you get podcasts.

Transition: Bright, chiming synth with a syncopated beat.

Jesse Thorn: This is *Bullseye*. I’m Jesse Thorn. My guest is Bay Area MC LaRussell.

So, when you started getting traction on social media, did you still think you were gonna sign a deal with somebody?

LaRussell: Yeah. Just because you're getting traction on social media doesn't mean your life is changing. Like, I was pretty viral on social media and still sleeping on the couch at my mom's house. I would have to pull out the couch every day and set up blankets and in the morning get up, put the blankets away, and put my couch back in. So, you know, the intention was the same throughout that journey. It was like, "Man, we gotta figure out something to make this change."

Jesse Thorn: So, what changed? Because you didn't sign that deal. You know what I mean? At some point I'm sure somebody from Rock Nation showed up at your door and said, "I'll give you 100 grand for a 360 for five years" or whatever.

LaRussell: They did. But what happened prior to that is Russ, another independent artist, knocked on my door and said, "I'll give you 100 grand for an album with none of the extra stuff. And I will allow you to build until you're ready." And that was one of the first deals I did that aligned and made sense and gave me some capital to start building my company. It gave me a little more leisure in turning down a Rock Nation. You know? Because it was like, "Okay, I could at least utilize this to get me a little further in my journey."

Jesse Thorn: When were you the least confident that it was going to work?

LaRussell: When was I the least confident it was going to work? That's tough. Every time I go broke, it falters my confidence. You know? When you make so much money and you gotta go back down to zero, and you make some more money, and you gotta go back down to zero, and you make some more money? Like, that journey of entrepreneurship breaks you. Like, it literally breaks you down to pieces. 'Cause every time you gotta question if you've done the right things, the wrong things, how'd you do it? How much like—It's just a tedious process to go through to be an innovator and an inventor. You know?

You know, Elon Musk made PayPal, sold it for a hundreds of millions, and then went back down to zero to build Tesla. You know? So, every time you get in that space where you're like, "Man, everything that I'm doing, everything I'm risking, everything I'm putting my money on, like these things aren't paying off." And it's not that they're not paying off, it's just sometimes you don't see dividends for years in music from something you've invested in. You know? And you always think about what other things you could've done—

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—or how else you could have assisted, or if you're getting—Like, especially when you feed so many people or take care of so many people, like it's just—It's just the journey of entrepreneurship is a tedious task, and most people quit before they make it. Which is like—rightfully so. I don't think I don't think anyone could last in my shoes.

Jesse Thorn: Do you feel safe? Like, do you feel like you are doing enough to protect yourself and your family as you build this huge thing? I don't mean physically; I mean like financially and emotionally.

LaRussell: I think I'm getting to that. You know? I think, as of right now, no. But I do feel like I'm building something that will be that. You know? But in the route, it's like—when you're building a house, you don't have a home yet. So, if you die while you're building the house, you

just die building the house. But if you complete the house, then you have a home that people can live in for the rest of the time, whether you're there or not. You know. I'm in the phase of building the house.

Jesse Thorn: How did you become the musical voice of my favorite baseball team, the San Francisco Giants?

LaRussell: Yeeeeeah! Man, they have an incredible head of marketing person over there, named Rachel, who just happened to be a LaRussell fan! She came to a backyard show, and I didn't even know who she was, but she loved the experience. And when she finally got the job there and got in position, she was like, "I'm going to give my favorite artist an opportunity." And she brought that to us, and we created something, and now it's in the world!

Jesse Thorn: I love it for you. To me, the number one level of entertainment industry success is local sports fan celebrity. Like, if you're Spike Lee and the Knicks, you have made it. You know what I mean? (*Chuckles.*)

LaRussell: Yeah. That's funny. Yeah.

Jesse Thorn: When the Giants are in the World Series or the 49ers are in the playoffs and 40 Water is in the front row, and he is on camera, and they're like, "Oh, there's the Bay Area sitting right there." You know what I mean? And that's the feeling that you get when you get to make the themes the theme song for the ball club.

LaRussell: Right! Right. That's a really special thing that never happens. Like, baseball has been the last sport to really embrace culture. Baseball is still in like the '70s in a lot of ways. You know, like they've been the very last to be like, "Bring all that hip-hop over here." (*Laughs.*) So, it's really dope to even get that opportunity and see the approval and see everyone accepted and to see that like the Bay area and the region— Like, you know people post me from the games. Like, they tag me 'cause they're excited to just hear it. It's the first time.

Jesse Thorn: You've been making records with Lil John lately. Lil John, of course, has a longstanding relationship with the Bay Area. He's from the Atlanta area but has a longstanding relationship with the Bay. But how did you end up making records with the king of crunk?

LaRussell: Man! We connected a few years ago, and it just— You know, we wanted to get in, but it just never aligned. And I hit him randomly one day. 'Cause I was in LA, and I just hit him and was like, you know, "I'm here. We should work."

And he responded and was like, "Let's get in tomorrow." And since then, we just been connected. We got a whole album done and we—just, he came to my house, and it just aligned! The timing was right.

Jesse Thorn: Am I right that he's a giant muscle man now?

LaRussell: Yeeeeeah! He just did like a strongman contest in his 50s!

Jesse Thorn: (*Laughs brightly.*) I love it for him.

LaRussell: Right? It's insane. He's a great guy. A great spirit.

Jesse Thorn: Okay. I wanna address him being a great guy. Because on one of these records that you made with Lil John—I'm trying to remember the exact couplet, but it's, "Stop me if I'm telling a lie—"

LaRussell: "I'm indie; I'm handsome; I'm fly. I know Lil John. What a guy!"

(*They laugh.*)

Music: "I Got Flavor" by LaRussell.

I got flavor in me, man

I got flavor!

I put the sauce in the pie

I got flavor! Ooh!

Stop me if you catch me in a lie

I'm indie; I'm handsome; I'm fly

I know Lil John

What a guy!

Oh, you ain't know I was a chef? Surprise!

Let's go!

I got flavor, you know what I mean?

(*Music fades out.*)

Jesse Thorn: When I first heard that record, I'm like, "I don't know if I've ever heard someone rap 'what a guy' before."

[00:35:00]

LaRussell: *(Giggles.)* Definitely not.

(They laugh.)

Jesse Thorn: I do feel like maybe that speaks to your ethos as an MC, though. Like, the idea of saying someone else is a great guy is not something that comes up thematically in a lot of hip-hop records. You know?

LaRussell: *(Laughing.)* Right, right.

Jesse Thorn: Do you feel confident that you're the guy that can put a genial compliment about another dude on a hip-hop record and not lose his cred?

LaRussell: I mean, I did!

(They laugh.)

I feel like I'm like the anomaly that gets to say all the things that no one else could get off in raps and rhymes, and it's just like cool. You know?

Music: “I Got Flavor”

I'm keeping hip-hop alive

City to city, I'm paying tithes

We outside; the star can't hide

I'm gleaming in the sky, shining like the sun

Wanted poster; I'm a— on the run

I don't pop purse or rap about guns

I (unclear) dope raps, make cash, and have fun

I remember days when I didn't have none

Wasn't adding up, couldn't figure out the sum

Look where I'm at now!

A— came from, from the background

Real Gs move like a bat sound

I'm a (unclear) now

Gave so much to the game

Ain't no way I ain't top five

I changed lives

My pocket full of hot fries, chips!

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: What do you think is the point where you stop plowing everything back into the brand and start collecting those dividends? When do you think you can feel like, “I’m doing it the way I want to be doing it, and I get to sit on a sofa on my butt for a little bit”?

LaRussell: I got a freestyle that went viral in 2021. It was like one of my first really viral moments. And then the freestyle said, “Let’s see who’ll be around when it’s 2026.” So, I’m gonna say 2026.

Jesse Thorn: Well, I hope you’ll come back here and let me know about it.

LaRussell: Yeah, I will. You’ll see it too though.

Jesse Thorn: That’s what’s up.

(LaRussell laughs.)

It was great to talk to you, LaRussell. Thank you so much for taking the time.

LaRussell: You got it, dude. I appreciate it. You’re good. These are dope.

Jesse Thorn: LaRussell. As we mentioned before, you can follow him on social media where he is for real putting out a new song and a new video basically like once a week. His newest full video is called “I’m From the Bay”. The video was shot at Pittsburgh High School in beautiful Pittsburgh, California. And you know what? Let’s go out on that one. Run it back, Chewy.

Music: “I’m From the Bay” by LaRussell and Lil John.

I'm from the Bay (I'm from the Bay)

I rep it hard (I rep it hard)

I'm known worldwide, but I grew up from my backyard

(From my backyard!)

I'm from the Bay (he's from the Bay)

That's Northern Cal (that's Northern Cal)

They like my songs; they like my smile; they like my style

Let's go!

This ain't nothing you ain't heard before

I put a new twist on the stuff from '06

This ain't nothing you ain't heard before...

(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 in the historic jewelry district in downtown Los Angeles, California. I was just there on a date night with my wife! We stopped in the office; she hadn't seen it yet. And then we went to one of those restaurants that's really high up in the sky on a big, tall building. That was called 71 Above. And a very sweet young couple got engaged at the table right next-door to us, and it wasn't even cheesy. It was just very beautiful, and it was nice to see their love.

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 this week to Bryan Matheson at Skyline Studios in Oakland, California for recording our man, LaRussell. 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. 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 that you heard this week. You wanna watch

LaRussell get down to his own records? Well, hit us up! TikTok, YouTube, Instagram. Let's go! *Bullseye!* Okay, I think that's about it. Just remember, all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

Music:

A lifesaver, Kenobi or something

I got the sauce; Bertolli or something

Promo: *Bullseye* with Jesse Thorn is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.

Music:

I put a new twist on the from '06

This ain't nothing you ain't heard before

I got a little story; it goes something like this

(Come on!)

This ain't you ain't heard before

I put a new twist on the stuff from '06

This ain't nothing you ain't heard before...

(Music fades out.)