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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 is *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. At the very end of 2025, we lost Isiah Whitlock Jr. He was 71. Isiah Whitlock Jr. had been a working actor for a very long time. He got his first TV parts in the '80s, started acting on stage well before then. Like any good working New York actor, he accumulated well over a dozen cameos on various *Law & Order* shows.

In the early 2000s though, he got the role that changed the trajectory of his career. He played State Senator Clay Davis on *The Wire*—a corrupt but charming Baltimore politician who manages to gum up plans for drug dealers, politicians, and cops alike. You might recall his catchphrase, an extended expletive that we cannot say on the radio.

Anyway. While Whitlock's role in *The Wire* was a huge break for him, it showed the world something that was always true. Whitlock was a compelling presence onscreen. He could be charming or menacing or funny, sometimes all at once. He also starred in Spike Lee's *Da 5 Bloods* with Delroy Lindo, Clarke Peters, and Chadwick Boseman.

When I talked with Whitlock in 2021, he was promoting the show *Your Honor*. The legal thriller starred him and Bryan Cranston and aired on Showtime for two seasons. *Your Honor* revolves around the coverup of a hit-and-run involving the son of a New Orleans judge, played by Cranston. Isiah played Charlie, his best friend. In this scene, Cranston's character meets Charlie at a diner. He's just asked him for a pretty huge favor: to help him dispose of his son's car.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Clip:

Music: Cheerful, upbeat music.

Charlie (*Your Honor*): It's gotta be painful for you. (*Beat.*) Seeing it there every day, in the street, outside your home. If you were never to see it again, it would be harder for a day or so, the absence. (*Beat.*) And then... (*sighs*). Drop the key behind the front-left wheel. Give me a few hours. I don't have a brother. And then again? I do.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Jesse Thorn: Isiah Whitlock, welcome to *Bullseye*.

Isiah Whitlock Jr.: Thank you! Thanks for having me.

Jesse Thorn: And congratulations on cornering the market on moral relativity in acting.

(*They laugh.*)

At this point, I think you're—(*chuckling*) anytime someone needs somebody to do something kind of shady... Not absolutely, purely shady, but preeetty shady—

Isiah Whitlock Jr.: I'm good—I'm good with the shade. I'm good with the shade. Yeah. Ask me to do something outright? Maybe not. But a little shady? Yeah. I can handle that.

Jesse Thorn: (*Chuckles.*) How did you get this part?

Isiah Whitlock Jr.: They called up, presented it to me. You know. And I looked it over, found out what it was, who it was. And just the thought of being able to work with Bryan Cranston and people like Michael Stuhlbarg, Hope Davis—I really just jumped at the chance. And the part also presented me a little bit of a challenge, because—you know, I'm always sort of trying to—I mean, after doing Clay Davis in *The Wire*, you know, you make a hard stamp. And I'm always looking for things to be able to kind of move away from that. And even though there are some similarities with this character, there's enough there to make it seem like it's a little bit different. I can do some different things. I can really kind of open up and that really excited me.

Jesse Thorn: I mean, it's really something to think that you were about 50 years old when you got a career defining role, and then here you are in your mid-60s. You just starred in a movie. In *Da 5 Bloods*, a critically acclaimed movie. It's odd

parts of your life to have these kinds of extraordinary career milestones, but in a way kind of good parts of your life to have those things happen? Like, you'd hate to have done those things at 20 and have it be all downhill from there.

Isiah Whitlock Jr.: *(Laughs.)* Yeah. I never really looked at it that way. I mean, I guess in hindsight—you know—maybe I'm making up for some lost time, because I gotta say I didn't play roles like this when I was in my 20s. I pretty much basically, when I looked at it—I waited for the landscape to change. And when the landscape changed, I was still there. So, I was able to get some of these roles and do a lot of the things that I've always wanted to do, but just never got the chance to do in my 20s and 30s.

Jesse Thorn: Yeah, I looked at your IMDb. And you know, you've been working as an actor for more than 40 years, now. But one of the things that jumped out to me—in terms of your screenwork—was that you had played 12 different characters on various *Law & Orders*.

(They laugh.)

And if that isn't a working New York actor, I don't know what is!

Isiah Whitlock Jr.: *(Laughs.)* Look, they kept calling me back. I kept going in, doing the job. I didn't realize it was that many, but I think it would be hard-pressed to find anybody else who was on that show more than me! I mean, with *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, *Criminal Intent*—I mean, I did them all. And one of the funniest things was I was on the original first episode of *Criminal Intent*. And my agent called me, ten years later, and he said, "I've got some good news, and I've got some bad news. The good news is they're bringing your character back on *Criminal Intent*. The bad news? It's gonna be the last episode they ever do."

(They chuckle.)

And so, *(laughing)* I was on the first one and I was on the last one. And the squalid part about this story is that I was still available after ten years.

(They laugh.)

That they called up and they knew, "Well, you know, we could—we could always get Isiah. You know? We'll find him." So, I did quite a few of them.

Jesse Thorn: You grew up in South Bend, Indiana, which is probably better known for football than it is for entertainment. What was your interest, as a kid? Did you think that you were gonna grow up to become an actor?

Isiah Whitlock Jr.: Nooo. I was pretty much into sports—football, things like that—when I was in high school. I didn't really have any desire to be an actor. But then I went away to college, in Minnesota—a place called Southwest State, Minnesota—and I played football there for about a year. I got banged up so much. I mean, I had concussions and broken ankles and—to me, it just didn't seem to make sense anymore. I mean, I thought, “If you're not gonna play professional football”—which I was not—“what was the point?” So, I had to start looking for something else. And I wandered by the theatre department. They were doing a production of *The Crucible*. And I managed to get a part in *The Crucible*—Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*—and I've been working ever since!

Jesse Thorn: It must've been a pretty different scene in the theatre department than it was on the football team.

Isiah Whitlock Jr.: Uh, it was. It was. And (*chuckles*) I took a lot of ribbing for going to the theatre department. It was interesting! Because, at that time, Jim Brown—the great Jim Brown, football player—had left the Cleveland Browns to become an actor in Hollywood. And so, you know, like *The Dirty Dozen* and things like that. And so, people were like, “So, who—what are you trying to do? You trying to be like Jim Brown? You wanna go to—be like Jim Brown and be this athlete turned actor?”

And I was like, “No.” I mean, I really had found something that I really enjoyed. And to me, it wasn't just the acting. It was—it was the plays and the literature, and I really got into it. And you know, Chekov and Shakespeare and all of these different writers. My grades in everything just shot up and I was on the Dean's list, because I was really excited about it and really prepared myself to be an actor from that point on.

Jesse Thorn: I don't know how else to ask this, but how many other Black folks were there at Southwest State, Minnesota?

Isiah Whitlock Jr.: Uhhh, there was me.

(*They laugh.*)

Jesse Thorn: Let the record state, I am presuming that you have your thumb pointed out and you're about to like lift your index finger and then your middle finger.

(They chuckle.)

Isiah Whitlock Jr.: There were not very many of us. I would say there was—there was a handful. And we were—you know, at that time we were a pretty close-knit group. You know? Because we're talking about 1972, '73? Roundabout then. And so, you know, the world was changing and going through that whole change of '60s, '70s, that kind of a thing. So, you sort of made your way. You did the best you could. You know. And then I went out to San Francisco and got the culture shock of my life and—but I survived that. And after that I was able to do pretty much anything or go anywhere.

Jesse Thorn: Even more still to come from my conversation with Isiah Whitlock Jr.; stay with us. It's *Bullseye* from [MaximumFun.org](https://www.maximumfun.org) and NPR.

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Transition: Thumpy synth with a syncopated beat.

Jesse Thorn: It is *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. We're replaying my 2021 conversation with Isiah Whitlock Jr.

Whitlock died last month. He was 71.

Did you go to San Francisco to become an actor? I know you were at ACT for a time.

Isiah Whitlock Jr.: Yeah. I had gone out in the summer of 1975, just for like a summer program that they had. And they liked me enough to ask me to stay there and go to school there and study there. But—

Jesse Thorn: I should say that ACT is the American Conservatory Theatre.

Isiah Whitlock Jr.: Right. Right. American Conservatory Theatre. And I had promised my dad that I would finish college. That was a big thing for me. I knew what it meant to him. So, I said, "I can't stay, but if I can go back and finish college and come back, I'll do it." And that's what they let me do. And I went back to the American Conservatory Theatre, studied for about two or three years, and then they took me into the company there. I was in the company there for about four years. And then, after I left there I came to New York.

Jesse Thorn: Had either of your parents gone to college?

Isiah Whitlock Jr.: No. Nobody in my family had gone to college. And I had quite a large family. So, it really did mean a big thing to finally have somebody take that step and finish. And just how proud my father was—I'll never forget that.

Jesse Thorn: Was it a hard choice to make or an easy one?

Isiah Whitlock Jr.: It was an easy choice to make. Easy choice. Very easy. I even started—I sang with a band when I was in college. And they wanted to leave school and go on the road and everything. Which they did, but again, I dropped out of the band 'cause I said, you know, “I gotta finish college.” I didn't—one, I didn't go to college to join a band. And I said, “I've gotta finish school.” So. Clutch and the Shifters was the name of the band. (*Laughs.*)

Jesse Thorn: I was about to say— (*Playfully.*) Well, I was gonna say it, 'cause it would be more fun if I said it.

Isiah Whitlock Jr.: You can go ahead and say it.

Jesse Thorn: To prove that it said it, here on my notes: Clutch and the Shifters—members of a middle-American Music Hall of Fame or something along those lines.

Isiah Whitlock Jr.: Yes! We're in the Mid-America Music Hall of Fame. Bob Dylan is in that hall of fame. So, you know, when people start to knock it—you know. Look. When people start to knock it, I always say, “Well, you know, and you're in what hall of fame?” You know what I mean?

(*They laugh.*)

So, you know. I mean, a hall is a hall, you know? But it's a rock and roll hall of fame. You know. So, I'm very proud of that moment.

Jesse Thorn: You went to ACT and your classmates at ACT included—among others—Delroy Lindo, who was one of the other stars of *Da 5 Bloods*, and perhaps ACT's most distinguished alumnus: a guy called Denzel Washington, who folks might have heard of. What were you studying there? How was it different from going and—you know, getting an MFA from Yale School of Drama or whatever?

Isiah Whitlock Jr.: I didn't know that much about say like Yale or Juilliard or places like that. I mean, you heard about them. And you know, they were like the major programs. My whole feeling at that time was the fact that—you know—any program wanted me. I mean, it was like I didn't really care too much where I was.

And in hindsight, you know, if you can act, you can act. And I had a pretty good setup when I was at ACT. I mean, I was in a company there, working with some great actors and things like that. But it was quite a class when I look back. I was a couple of years ahead of Delroy and Denzel, but we were all there in San Francisco—Danny Glover was in San Francisco at that time. You know, you had interactions.

You know, when I—when I went to Thailand to shoot *Da 5 Bloods*, to be able to talk to Delroy after 40 years about that time was special, because we were all sort of like making our way and trying to find out, you know, who we were as human beings, as actors. And, you know, the mistakes and things like that that you've made along the way. But the successes that we've had. And yet, we were still standing after all those years.

Jesse Thorn: What specifically did you talk about?

Isiah Whitlock Jr.: Uh, we talked about just the situation in the school and being in the company and kind of like the state of theatre at that time, because at that time there wasn't very much to do. So, they were desperate times. I mean, you had to really scratch and seek out where the work was. A lot of stuff was in New York, because—you know, they had the Negro Ensemble Company and a lot of other theatres in New York City. But once you got out of New York City, the pickings were kind of slim. So, you always had that in the back of your mind. So, we talked a little bit about that and how the landscape has changed. There's so many opportunities. You know. I always tell people, I say, "You know, back then you had three channels on television, and you didn't see very many African Americans on those channels." So, you always sort of went through that period of, "Am I wasting my time doing this? Because I don't see the opportunities."

That's why you had to have something a little deeper going on that was holding you there. You know? You had to really love the literature, the plays, the writing, and things like that to kind of help get you through those tough times where you don't feel like you're just sitting there treading water or wasting time. And as the landscape started to change, it was able to help you cement yourself in the industry.

Jesse Thorn: What mistakes did you talk about?

Isiah Whitlock Jr.: Well, we talked a little bit about our approach. Our approach. Because my approach was—and pretty much is like my approach today—is I could see the seriousness of the situation, but I didn't let it get too deep inside me, so to speak, to where it put me on a different course. And I'm not gonna say he did, either. But we talked about how we handle different situations in the theatre, because you couldn't get too bogged down in the—say, like the politics of the

times to let it derail you. And you just sorta had to keep your eyes on the prize and keep going forward.

Jesse Thorn: I mean, it's a lot of different responsibilities. I think in—just being in acting school, the politics of that are plenty. *(Chuckles.)* You know? Not to—not to paint with a broad brush about actors or acting school, but you know, there's a lot of people with a lot of feelings in theatre school and then to be dealing with the literal politics of the outside world in the early 1970s and to be dealing with the fact that the two of you were African American in a theatre world that—it had basically only occurred this world to include African Americans at all, like, 10 years earlier. *(Chuckles dryly.)*

(Isiah agrees.)

You know? Like, from 0 to 2 out of 100 had happened 10 years previously with, you know, Lorraine Hansberry or whatever.

Isiah Whitlock Jr.: Yeah. I remember I had a conversation where we talked about was it a meritocracy, where you go, and would it just all be about a meritocracy, and your vision. I never really looked at it that way. You know? I always knew, well, it might be a meritocracy one day, but then there's other days where I saw a lot of people, you know, sliding through that—it made you wonder. So, you know, you gotta take the bitter with the sweet, the give and take of the business, and just not let it get you down. And I still sort of feel that way.

Jesse Thorn: You have a really wonderful start to your career, on film. Your IMDb and your Wikipedia list two films in which you appeared in 1990, both of which are profoundly beloved cult classics. One is *Goodfellas* and the other is *Gremlins 2: The New Batch*.

(They chuckle.)

I've actually seen *Gremlins 2: The New Batch* more recently. I saw that about eight months or a year ago. It's a pretty amazing movie. *(Laughs.)* Can you tell me—can you tell me how it came to be that you ended up in two pretty big movies to start your career? Albeit in small roles.

Isiah Whitlock Jr.: *Gremlins 2*, I think I was like a fireman or something. That might have been like the first or second movie that I—that I did. I was really like trying to scratch things out. But *Goodfellas* was interesting, because I had become a member of The Actor's Studio. And Paul Newman was looking for some people to come over to his apartment and read *The Color of Money* with Martin Scorsese, Tom Cruise. And I went over to the apartment to read.

Jesse Thorn: You said, “Sorry, I’m busy. I have plans, Paul Newman.”

(Isiah laughs.)

“I have a date. Sooo...”

Isiah Whitlock Jr.: Yeah, it’s like, “Look, uh, you know, I gotta go over to Paul’s apartment and sit on the couch and read.” And he had a handful of people there. And we’re all sitting around and we’re—and we’re reading *The Color of Money* and, of course, I wanted a part in the movie. And I didn’t get a part in the movie. That part went to Forest Whitaker. But when *Goodfellas* came around, I went to audition for *Goodfellas*. I got an audition for *Goodfellas* and I got a callback! And I got called back for—I can’t remember the actor’s name, but the scene is when he comes to Joe Pesci with the bill and Pesci hits him over the head with the bottle. He owns the restaurant or whatever. And I thought, “Well, there’s no way they’re gonna cast me in this part. But I got a callback, so I’m not gonna say no! I haven’t really done a movie.”

So, I go, and I walk in and Scorsese says, “I know you from somewhere.”

And I said, “Yeah, I did those readings on the couch for *The Color of Money*.”

And he says, “Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah! That’s great. That’s great.” He says, “Well, look. The part you auditioned for—you can’t play that. But I do have this role of a doctor. It’s a very, very small part, but it’s very instrumental to the movie. It’s the only guy that Henry Hill trusts. He’s all coked out and everything like that. Do you think you could do that for me? I know it’s not much. But do you think you could do that?”

And inside I’m saying, “Act like you’ve been there. Act like you’ve been there.” And I say, “Yeah, yeah, sure, Marty. Yeah, I—I think I could do that. Uh, yeah! Yeah. Yeah, yeah!”

And *(chuckles)*—so, he said, “Great.”

Jesse Thorn: “Let me check in with Paul real quick. I’m going over to his apartment later.”

Isiah Whitlock Jr.: *(Laughing.)* Right. And that’s how I ended up in *Goodfellas*! But at the time, I kind of took it in stride until I started going out and I started telling people, “Yeah, you know, I got this part in this movie, *Goodfellas*.” And that was the big story was how the hell did you get a part in *Goodfellas*? Which was called *Wise*

Guy, at the time. And I was working a job at a restaurant and there was one guy who actually said, “Look, tomorrow I’m going down and I’m gonna audition for *Goodfellas*, because if you got a part, I know I’m gonna get a part.”

(They laugh.)

He was like, “They must just be giving parts away in this movie if they hired you!” Well, he—needless to say, he didn’t get a part and screw him. *(Chuckles.)*

Jesse Thorn: We have so much more with Isiah Whitlock Jr. still to come. We haven't even talked about *The Wire* yet. We will talk about that and about how he came to embrace Clay Davis's signature catchphrase. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

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Promo:

Music: “My Life is Better With You (*My Brother, My Brother and Me* Podcast Theme Song)” by Montaigne.

Travis McElroy: You know, we've been doing *My Brother, My Brother and Me* for 15 years. And maybe—

Justin McElroy: *(Interrupting.)* CHRIST. *(Laughs.)*

Travis McElroy: Maybe you stopped listening for a while. Maybe you never listened. And you're probably assuming “Three White guys talking for 15 years. I know where this has ended up.” But no!

Justin: No! You would be wrong. We're as shocked as you are *(chuckling)* that we have not fallen into some sort of horrific scandal or just turned into a big crypto thing.

(Travis and Griffin agree.)

Travis: Yeah. We don't even really know how crypto works!

Griffin McElroy: The only NFTs I'm into are Naughty Funny Things, which is what we talk about on *My Brother, My Brother and Meeee*.

Justin: We serve it up every Monday for you—if you're listening. And if not, (*laughing*) we just leave it out back until it goes rotten!

Travis: So, check it out on Maximum Fun or wherever you get your podcasts.

(*Music fades out.*)

Transition: Thumpy synth with a syncopated beat.

Jesse Thorn: Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. We're listening back to my 2021 interview with actor Isiah Whitlock Jr. He's performed in movies like *Goodfellas* and *Da 5 Bloods*. He played State Senator Clay Davis on *The Wire*, and he starred alongside Bryan Cranston in the legal thriller *Your Honor*. Whitlock died late last month. He was 71. Let's hear the rest of our conversation.

Your character on *The Wire*, Clay Davis, he was briefly in the first season of the show, right? It was just starting up when you went in.

Isiah Whitlock Jr.: Yeah.

Jesse Thorn: Did you get to read any whole scripts before you went in for that part, or had you just seen little sides?

Isiah Whitlock Jr.: No, the thing with *The Wire* is also very interesting, because I was in season one and season two, but I was only supposed to be there at a cocktail party. There was no storyline, there was nothing written. It was just this state senator. After those, they decided, “Well, we should maybe do something with this. We should maybe do a storyline.” And when they called me to come back for season three, I initially said no. Because I thought it was just gonna be this sort of cocktail party stuff and I was doing *Othello* in Alabama. And I said, “No, I can't be bothered. I just—I'm not gonna go.”

And my agent called me, and he says, “Are you sure?”

I said, “No!” I said, “I'm doing *Othello*, down here in Alabama! I can't be concerned with some little cocktail party.”

And they finally convinced me to go, and David Simon pulled me aside and said, “Now, we've got this whole thing set up, this whole storyline where you're gonna

be ripping off the drug dealers and things like that. And their thing—they're ripping you off, and you're gonna be ripping them off." And that's when I got excited about it. But I was never, ever on their radar from the beginning.

Jesse Thorn: Was the show on your radar? I mean, did you realize by then what it was?

Isiah Whitlock Jr.: Yeah.

Jesse Thorn: Not many folks were watching it at the time.

Isiah Whitlock Jr.: Yeah. I did because I had a lot of friends on the show. And you know, I mean I thought the show was great. I just didn't—I really, at the time, just didn't see myself in it. And then, when I got on it—I can admit this, now—my biggest fear was that—I said, "Don't be the weak link. This is like a great show. Don't be the weak link. Don't be the guy—" You know, they say, "Oh yeah, *The Wire* and then that guy, (*chuckles*) Isiah Whitlock. Other than that, the show's, like, fantastic!"

But I was terrified. I was just terrified, you know. I said, "This could go one of two ways."

But that being said, I had the courage enough to do what I wanted to do. And when I was at the American Conservatory Theatre, the artistic director—Bill Ball—would always say, "Fail big. If you're gonna fail, fail big." So, I thought, okay, I'm gonna fail big and kind of go for it and play what I feel or what I think this character should be. And there was a period where I thought, "Oh, I know they're gonna fire me." But then I also thought, "You know, if they don't like it, they can always cut it." But nobody ever said anything to me, and they just kind of let me continue to create. And it was that freedom that they gave me that allowed me to just even do more stuff and solidify that character.

Jesse Thorn: How did you feel the impact of your work on *The Wire*? Did folks talk to you about it?

Isiah Whitlock Jr.: Uh, every day. Every day. It—at the end of *The Wire*, David Simon came to me, and he said, "You know you're gonna have to live with the catch phrase and everything like that." And I didn't believe him. I thought, nah, you know, a year from now nobody's gonna really pay too much attention to it. But there's a few things there. One, I had to live with the catchphrase, but I also saw how the character affected people. It's like you're a bad guy and you're gonna make people love you. It would be so easy to just sort of dismiss the character. But the key is to make people like you and make people enjoy you when they see you.

And I thought I was able to do that on the show and then fast forward to today; people still feel that way. I mean, there's times when, you know—not just here, but around the world, places I've gone where people stop me in Venice or New Zealand or something like that and they're going on and on and on about *The Wire* and my character on *The Wire*.

Jesse Thorn: You alluded to your character's catchphrase, which was an expletive that starts with S-H and, in the show, is—I'm trying to public radio this—and in the show is extended and emphasized. And in fact—I mean, I guess this is just gonna sound like... on the radio at least it'll sound like a beep. But the first appearance of you (*laughing*)— Like a comic book. The first appearance of— (*laughing*) of my guest, Isiah Whitlock Jr saying an extended expletive that starts with S-H on film was in the *25th Hour*, the Spike Lee movie. And why don't we take a listen to that?

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Clip:

Music: Ominous orchestral music.

Agent Flood (*25th Hour*): You know, it's a good thing I found this. It's gonna make your sofa so much more comfortable to sit on. (*A comically long censor beep.*) Mr. Brogan, I do believe you're (*censored*).

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Jesse Thorn: (*They giggle.*)

So, on *The Wire*, were they already aware of your extraordinary ability to say that particular expletive?

Isiah Whitlock Jr.: Uh, that I don't know. I—you know, it was weird, because when I got on *The Wire*, I really didn't wanna do it. I really didn't wanna do it in the *25th Hour*. I remember when I auditioned for the *25th Hour*, I did that and Spike Lee kind of laughed and said, you know, "You should keep that." But when I got to set, I had some other stuff rigged up that I was gonna do. It was—I heard, "Cut." He said, "You should do that thing you do."

And I said, “Uh, what?”

He said, “You know. That thing you were doing at the audition. Yeah, do that.”

And I said, “I was thinking about maybe trying to do that later.”

He said, “No, I think you need to do that now and you can also do it later.”

(Jesse laughs.)

And so, that’s when I—when I did it, pulling the stuff out of the couch. And so, that’s where that started. And then when I got onto *The Wire*— I mean, saying that word is common.

(Jesse agrees.)

You know, especially among African Americans. It wasn’t like the first time you had heard it. I think the difference was the way I did it and where you place it in the nose and the— I mean, you know, I’m not gonna get too technical, but that’s what started to get a little—that’s what I thought elevated it. So, when I got on *The Wire*, it was written into a couple of the scripts that I had. And at first I thought, *(skeptically)* “Eeh, I don’t know—I don’t know if I wanna do that.” But then I thought, “Ah, what the hell.” You know? “I’ll just let it rip.” And the next *(chuckles)*—next episode, it ripped, and it kept ripping and kept ripping and all of the sudden it became a part of my life. *(Laughs.)*

Jesse Thorn: I mean, one of the wonderful things about that television show is that it is so grounded—especially relative to other dramatic TV—that when there is something ridiculous or magical, like those moments can play perfectly fine, because—because it is so not ridiculous of a program. I mean, it’s like the least ridiculous dramatic television show you could make. And so, it plays.

(Isiah agrees.)

Because everything else is a profoundly sincere deconstruction of power structures in America.

Isiah Whitlock Jr.: But again, the key is making that thing sincere. It has to be sincere, otherwise—if they see you blink, if they see you are not totally committed to it, that’s when it becomes this weird sort of caricature-type thing. But if you place it right and you really commit to it and you really make it honest and sincere about how it is you feel about something, they have no reason but to buy it. And

when you look at a lot of these characters similar to that, that's what I always see, is that if you really commit to it, it can work for you.

Jesse Thorn: I think that that same thing is true of that character in general. I mean, I think it's easy to portray a corrupt politician as a sort of unvarnished, pure evil. But I think Clay Davis exemplifies something that I think is probably a lot closer to the way corrupt politics actually play out in the real world, which is people who have their vision for the world and the way that they wanna change their world, represent their community. It gets tied up in their own identity of who they are, and they start making compromises about how to get that, moving forward. And you know, it's a lot more complicated than just—you know—twiddling the ends of a curly moustache.

Isiah Whitlock Jr.: Yeah. You gotta keep it very, very subtle and you gotta stay ahead of the viewer with what it is you're doing. It's not an easy part to play, I felt. Because you know, there's a lot of traps there. And it can just become sort of like this evil guy. But the real key to me, with Clay Davis, was I was like I'm gonna make it to where you can't dismiss me. Where you just can't say, "Oh, he's the bad politician," or whatever. I'm gonna make it to where you need to deal with me. You can't dismiss me. You've gotta watch me. You've gotta be aware of what it is I'm doing, because I can go one way or the other. And when I look at some of the politicians we have today—I'm not gonna start mentioning names, but that's what they do.

Jesse Thorn: Yeah, I mean, *The Wire* ultimately was not a show about good people caught up in a bad system—though, I guess you could probably say that of the children, at least—or bad people perpetrating a bad system, but human beings in a system that chews them up to various degrees, who are just human. You know?

Speaking of Grace Notes, there are a lot of celebrities who have their own brand of alcohol. The only celebrity whose alcohol I can say I've ever purchased is E-40. Shoutout to E Cuarenta Tequila and Slurrricane. That's sort of my responsibility as a native of the Bay Area. Most of those did not start their process by making the alcohol in their house in like a series of tubes and vats.

(Isiah laughs.)

And the second that I read that you were trying to make chardonnay in your dining room, I *(chuckling)*—I was over the moon about it! I mean, this is the greatest thing I've ever heard in my life. So, when did you decide that you could make wine in your apartment in New York City?

Isiah Whitlock Jr.: You know, you're sitting there and you're drinking a little wine. Maybe I was drinking a little too much. And I said, "Well, how hard can this be?" So, I went out and I bought like all of the equipment and some fairly sophisticated equipment, but just on a small scale. And I made chardonnay and I made a cabernet Sauvignon. And I got the juice. It was frozen, which is what they do a lot now. And you know, I read up on it. And I started making it in my apartment.

This is after I broke up with my girlfriend, but *(chuckles)* otherwise she would have said, you know, "There's no way." You know. "Get this stuff out of here." Because it really consumed like the whole apartment. And it—it did smell a little bit, but—

(They laugh.)

But it wasn't bad! It wasn't bad. And then I found a place in New Jersey—a place called California WineWorks, and they had a big facility and everything like that. So, I was able to source the grapes from Napa and then do the blending and the fermenting and all of that there. And that's what I did. And now I make very good wine. I always take it to—if I take it to a party, I just put it there and let people drink it and they go, "Oh my god!" You know. "This is really good! Where—who is this? Who is this?"

And it's like, "Well, it just happens to be, uh, Whitlock." But if I come right out and tell them that I made it, usually they don't touch it. You know. They look at me and they look at the wine and they say, "Okay, I think I'll have a coke."

(Chuckles.)

Jesse Thorn: You named one of the wines after a dance associated with a Rufus Thomas hit from the mid-'70s. For like—it's one of the ones he does in *Wattstax* or something like that.

Isiah Whitlock Jr.: Yeah, the Funky Penguin.

(They chuckle.)

Jesse Thorn: So, I can tell you're enjoying it, is what I'm saying.

Isiah Whitlock Jr.: Yes. Yes. Yes. Well, the Funky Penguin was a dance that was real big back in the '70s. You know? Which I was very adept at doing. You know. That's what I did when I was with Clutch and the Shifters. You know. I wore a silk lame suit, and I did the Funky Penguin, and—you know, the rest is history.

(They laugh.)

Hey! We're in the hall of fame, okay? We're in the hall of fame! I couldn't have been that bad! *(Laughs.)*

Jesse Thorn: Now I've got you in my head like swirling the wine around in your mouth saying, like, "I taste notes of—notes of cherries and—you know, vanillins, and—"

Isiah Whitlock Jr.: North Pole.

(They laugh.)

If I get a bigger operation than my living room, you'll see it on your shelves. You know.

Jesse Thorn: Well, Isiah Whitlock Jr., I sure appreciate you coming on *Bullseye*. It was really nice to get to talk to you.

Isiah Whitlock Jr.: Thank you so much.

Jesse Thorn: Isiah Whitlock Jr. from 2021. He died last month at 71. If you haven't seen him in *Da 5 Bloods* or *The Wire*, he was an incredible genius. Go give it a look.

Transition: Bright, chiming synth.

Jesse Thorn: That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye*, created in 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.

The 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. We get booking help from Mara Davis. Our interstitial music comes from our friend Dan Wally, also known as DJW. You can find his music at [DJWsounds.bandcamp.com](https://djwsounds.bandcamp.com). Our theme music, 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 fades out.)

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