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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. I want to get into my next guest with a song. Chewy, if you would.

Music: "Compared to What" from the album *First Take* by Roberta Flack.

> *I said love the lie and lie the love*
>
> *Hanging on, with a push and shove*

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: That's "Compared to What" by Roberta Flack, the first song on her debut album. You can hear that baseline, right? It's an upright bass—catchy, funky, mesmerizing. It alternates between foreground and background seemingly effortlessly. It is a masterclass in that instrument taught by my guest, Ron Carter. He played bass on the entire album.

In a career that spans over five decades, Carter has played jazz, classical, soul, even hip-hop. He's won three Grammys, worked with Miles Davis, Alice Coltrane, Aretha Franklin, Herbie Hancock, Billie Joel, A Tribe Called Quest. I could go on, but this is an interview show, not a naming famous musical acts show. When I talked with Carter just a few years ago, he was gearing up to celebrate his 85th birthday at Carnegie Hall. These days, he is 88, and he is unstoppable.

Let's kick things off with a little bit of Carter's latest record. It's called *Sweet, Sweet Spirit*. It's a gospel album. It's also a tribute to Carter's mother, featuring covers of her favorite hymns. Here's "Farther Along".

Music: "Farther Along" from the album *Sweet, Sweet Spirit* by Ron Carter.

Farther along, we'll know all about it.

Farther along, we'll understand why

Cheer up, my brother

(Music fades out.)

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

Ron Carter: Thanks for the warm welcoming, and thanks for the sunshine you brought today.

Jesse Thorn: I was listening to your new record, and I was wondering—you know, you're 84 years old. You've been doing this for quite a long time. Are there things that you feel like you are better at now than you were 20 or 40 or 60 years ago?

Ron Carter: Ab-so-lutely!

Jesse Thorn: What are they?

Ron Carter: Patience. I've developed enough patience to let my decisions be made on hearing more of the project, rather than just enough that's convenient for me to hear. I've developed a higher sense of responsibility in that I understand why people have called me for their project. And I'm very concerned, as I've gotten better over the years, "can I meet their expectations of me, as they invited me for the choices they had for their project?" I developed a sense of my worth in that I know how much records sell. I know about the business of it, and I've always decided to be the guy who decides my new record value, rather than let someone else dictate that price sheet. And I developed another level of patience which allows me to do what I do, understanding that it must help the artist sound better.

Jesse Thorn: Gimme an example of something that you've done in the last few years where you think you got a new level of understanding from being patient that you might not have gotten when you were younger?

Ron Carter: All of them. I mean, I would not—

(They chuckle.)

I would not give away that kind of personal commentary on someone else's effect on me—or me on them!—and have that reflect on just them and my relationship rather than the other 2,221 people who *(laughs)*—who have been part of my process. That's not a nice thing to do, and I'd probably like to avoid this kind of step into this whole commentary.

(They chuckle.)

Jesse Thorn: I mean, I think it's interesting that when I asked you that question, such a big part of your answer— I mean, you talked about knowing your worth and so forth, but such a big part of your answer was about how you can best compliment other people's work. Which, you know, I mean, that's a bass player's answer, I guess. But you know, I don't think there's a lot of people out there who are artists who, you know, after a long career if you say, "What are you better at than ever before?" They say, "Oh, well… getting right what other people need." You know what I mean?

Ron Carter: Mm-hm. Well, that's always somewhere in the equation, but I think bass players who really understand their weight—W-E-I-G-H-T—as well as their W-A-I-T, as to our response to the band and the band's music, they have a constant reservoir of both of those items. And those who are able to keep their reservoir handy and don't mind dipping into it are those bass players who work the most often with the most wide variety of music that's available.

Jesse Thorn: Is your body different now, with regard to playing, than it was before?

Ron Carter: My physical body? My emotional body? My bass? I mean, *(unclear)*.

Jesse Thorn: Yeah. I mean, I think I was thinking of your physical body, but I'll take any of the three.

Ron Carter: I've learned how to play the bass better. So, of course my physical body is not taking the kind of weight—physical—that it had when I was 50 years

younger. My patience has grown, as well as the weight *(chuckles)* of that patience. And I think the more I play it, the more I'm still interested in how can I help these guys and gals get better who I'm accompanying. That weight—W-E-I-G-H-T.

Jesse Thorn: It's interesting, the idea that part of the skill that you have developed is that you are able to do what you wanna do physically with the instrument without having to use the force that you once would've had to do to accomplish the same end. That's amazing to me as a non-musician, to think of how part of your skill could be about lightening your own load in that way.

Ron Carter: Well, I think again—back to the broad category of bassists, I think once they understand the weight of each note they play—I, for one, like to develop my bassline so one note is more important than the preceding six, because I have constructed my bassline to do just that.

(Music fades in.)

If I'm successful, the note that's at the end of this line need not be louder or stronger than the preceding six, but that it's there at an appropriate time makes it weigh a whole lot more than a random choice of notes in the same spot.

Jesse Thorn: That makes a lot of sense.

Music: Upbeat, funky instrumental jazz. It continues under the dialogue a while, then fades out.

Jesse Thorn: You started playing cello, right?

Ron Carter: Yes.

Jesse Thorn: And how did a cello end up in your hands?

Ron Carter: I walked up to the table and picked up one. *(Laughs.)* I know you want—

Jesse Thorn: Were you looking—?

Ron Carter: I know you wanted a little more expansive answer, but that's kind of a simple answer for a question that's kind of on the table, you know?

Jesse Thorn: Sure! Well, I mean, was it like in a school classroom?

Ron Carter: Yeah, there's a teacher—ultimately, the orchestra conductor came to our junior—*(correcting himself)* elementary school, 10/11 years old, whatever grade that would be called—and said that she was gonna put these instruments on the table, as she was doing it. And she said she was gonna start an orchestra at this school, and you children would be in an orchestra, and just pick out an instrument that you think sounds like what you wanna do for a while.

And the cello seemed to be the one that I got the most complete sound—however I would define that at 12 years old. I picked that up, and I said, "I'll take this one."

Jesse Thorn: I mean, did they play for you *Young People's Guide to the Orchestra* or something like that?

Ron Carter: No? No.

Jesse Thorn: Or was it a matter of walking up and messing with 'em?

Ron Carter: Yeah. Walking up and messing with them. I'm not sure at that time orchestral adults, I would call them, knew that these kids of color would be interested in programs like the *Guide to the Orchestra*. That piece you just mentioned? Why would they wanna do that to these young children of color? *(Beat.)* Hello? *(Laughs.)*

Jesse Thorn: Well, somebody was—somebody was there *(laughs)*—I'm thinking about what you said.

Ron Carter: *(Playfully.)* C'mon! C'mon, guys. *(Laughs.)*

Jesse Thorn: I'm still here, I promise. *(Laughs.)* Well, I'm thinking about what you said. I mean, somebody's there to start an orchestra.

Ron Carter: Of their own—I assure you, of their own volition. Of their own desire to help these young kids know what orchestras are. And I'm positing to you that those people who would have the capacity to play samples of the instruments for these young kids who this person is trying to make an orchestra out of, it never occurred to them that they would help these kids. And this conductor was going

out on her own, to make that kind of choice that would be valuable down the line. And I'm saying I'm not sure that's changed much in the way that it happens today.

Jesse Thorn: Did it sound fun to you? Did it sound exciting to play in an orchestra?

Ron Carter: As I got older, it did. You know. I played in an orchestra until I was a senior in—'til I graduated from graduate school, masters. I played in the orchestras until 1962. I mean, if I could, I took the job. I love that sound. I used to like being in an orchestra when they do it for film scores. I loved the sound and how they arranged the music and the players who produced these various sounds that were told to them by somebody else to play these few sets of notes. I loved that kind of experience. I'm sorry I don't have a chance to do it much often, now.

Jesse Thorn: Do you remember how old you were or if you had some experience where you were playing in an orchestra and you thought something other than—Look, I played a little bit of music in school *(chuckling)*, and I remember thinking, "Ugh, this is hard." So, do you remember the point where you were playing and you thought, "Wow. This is great"?

Ron Carter: I'm not sure I can go that far back in my age category, but I think—I guess I was born in 1937, so probably 1938. I'm not—*(laughs)* I can't answer that kind of question. I did it as long as they allowed me to do it. That's a simple answer to a very complex question.

Jesse Thorn: When did you switch from cello to bass?

Ron Carter: January 1955.

Jesse Thorn: That's a very specific memory! *(Laughs.)*

Ron Carter: Well, at the time I was a senior in high school, and at the time, the school system had these conferences and meetings—PTA meetings and stuff like that, and each of these events would hire music from or ask from the schools in the neighborhood, the music program schools, to send some kids over to play some wallpaper music during the course of the conference. I thought that, based on my experience and me being observant, I played pretty damn good. And I don't understand why I wasn't getting the call for these gigs. And how come I wasn't there and there's one bass player who was graduating the—January of '55. And being good at math, I realized if I subtract one from one, I have a zero. Here's my chance to make that zero back to one again, if I'm the bass player. And I'm still looking at that angle.

Jesse Thorn: When you were in high school, was the school orchestra that you played in mostly African American kids?

Ron Carter: *(Chuckling.)* That was—the answer is no. But I'm surprised that that question comes to mind; I just explained—and I'm not trying to be a devil's advocate, but I explained to you I was feeling a little left out of the mix, so to speak. And to imply—to ask was the orchestra an African American orchestra—I don't get that connection. For me, the—

Jesse Thorn: Oh, I assumed that you meant that—you know, there were combos being put together to play these things from kids from different schools, and if you went to a school where most of the kids were Black, they weren't pulling you from—

Ron Carter: No, no. No, each school had their own orchestra program or music program.

Jesse Thorn: Got it.

Ron Carter: And each school was responsible for filling the needs of the—if they wanted a choir to sing during the course of or in intermission at the conference, or they wanted a marching band or the orchestra, whatever music program, that people were responsible for getting the quote/unquote "musical entertainment" for our wonderful high school kids. That high school got the job until the next one came around, and the next school was lined up wherever they were. But my high school was an integrated high school. The orchestra stuff, they were not overwhelmed with African Americans in number, so a minority in numbers. No.

Jesse Thorn: Right. So, there's, you know, 40 kids playing instruments at the school seriously. And you know, 35 of them are White, and it's the White kids that get to go be in the eight-piece band that plays at the PTA meeting?

Ron Carter: Well, I wasn't concerned with the numbers. I just knew that I wasn't counted among them.

Jesse Thorn: Right. How did you feel about classical music when you were a teenager? I imagine that's what you were playing in orchestra.

Ron Carter: I thought it was great. But I couldn't comprehend how they could write these sounds, and everyone play the right notes. I mean, sure, I'm still reading music and taking lessons, but for someone to sit down and really compose these tremendous pieces that had a hundred people playing at the drop of a baton, so to speak—have it sound so well thought out and well organized, so well-rehearsed, so

well known, so well respected and envied. It was just an amazing thing to see as a 13- to 14-year-old.

Jesse Thorn: You know, as a non-musician, as you described that—like *(laughs)* I understand what you mean so profoundly. Like, there is something kind of a marvel about a symphony, that someone conceived of this whole thing with so many pieces that fit together. And leaving aside the question of whether it's a compelling melody or a—you know, the basic things that affect people about music, you're just like, "Wow! Somebody—*(laughs)* somebody knew what to tell all these different kinds of instruments what to do!"

Ron Carter: Yes, that's exactly right. And they did it without complaint, night in and night out, and they got paid.

Jesse Thorn: What did you most like to listen to when you were a teenager?

Ron Carter: Classical music.

Jesse Thorn: Were you listening on the radio? Were you—did you have records?

Ron Carter: Well, on the radio, and they would take us to get in a bus and go to the Cobo Hall—or whatever it was called back in the Detroit days—to those concerts, and we'd sit in the audience and listen to the Detroit Symphony Orchestra play a concert or a partial concert. And occasionally, they would come to the junior high school or the high school and play a little concert and had them get out before the bus got turned off, and somebody's still on the bus. You know?

Jesse Thorn: Did your friends think classical music was corny?

Ron Carter: I don't know what they thought. I didn't ask their opinion. I thought—I liked the music. I was practicing to be as good as I could. I got a little ink and paper that promised me that I was—if I kept practicing, I would get better. And that didn't work out to be the case. Having said that, I didn't ask my peer's opinion. I'm listening to this music. I'm listening to what's going on. I'm watching the numbers go up and down. I'm listening to the calls go out. I'm listening to who's in what orchestra, who got this gig. And I know that my name and number didn't come up.

Jesse Thorn: Even more with Ron Carter after the break. We'll be back in a minute. It's *Bullseye* for MaximumFun.org and NPR.

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Jesse Thorn: It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. I'm talking with bassist Ron Carter. He's performed with Miles Davis, Chico Hamilton, Chet Baker, and many, many more.

When did you start working as a musician?

Ron Carter: I started playing at 11 to 12, so I would say 12.

(They laugh.)

Jesse Thorn: When did you start getting gigs? When did you start getting paid, and what were you playing?

Ron Carter: I was playing jazz, and the summer of my first return to Detroit from doing school, the summer between the spring semester and the fall semester. Spring—summer break. School was over. I came back to Detroit to do—work a day job, so I could afford to go back to school the following fall. And one of my neighbors was a saxophone player who was into—who was working for the summer, putting together groups to play for Winston University sorority and frat groups, for the summer parties and dances and stuff like that. And he asked me if I would wanna make some money for the summer. I said, "Well, I have to make some. That's why I'm here for the summer, to make money so I can go back to school in the fall."

Having said that, he said, "Well, I got some records for you here. Take a listen to it and tell me what you think." You know? So, I did. And I said, "Well, you know, I understand that it works. I don't know how it works and I'm not sure how I could help it work, but I'm into just seeing what it is. And if I can work with you, I'll have to do that and get better." That was my first summer gig.

Jesse Thorn: So, you were like 17/18/19 years old. This was after your first year of music college?

Ron Carter: Yeah, probably 18—late 18, going on 19. Yeah.

Jesse Thorn: Were these like party gigs?

Ron Carter: More like dances, not necessarily "party" in terms of how we define party today. Yeah.

Jesse Thorn: So, were you playing with big groups or small groups?

Ron Carter: No, no. Only a quartet. Quartet. At the time, Dave Brubeck had a hot record, and this person liked Dave Brubeck and liked Chet Baker. And so, the band was kind of settled around those leader-led bands in the library that they were well known for.

Jesse Thorn: What'd you have to learn to do that?

Ron Carter: For libraries? Whatever their famous tunes were, whatever song this guy liked of Chet Baker's, whatever. They thought Paul Desmond sounded really great at their libraries, whatever that was. Yeah.

Jesse Thorn: What'd you have to learn as a player, like beyond just the literal "you had to learn the songs," what did you have to learn to go from playing in an orchestra to playing in a combo for a dance?

Ron Carter: That I was the only bass player doing this. In the orchestra, you got six people playing the same notes, like it or not. In a small group, I'm the guy. And I still feel like that. I am the guy. I'm controlling everything but the salary. And if I get really good, then I can start to do that.

Jesse Thorn: *(Chuckles.)* Was that exciting?

Ron Carter: It still is! To know that one note I played does so much for a band, I love that kind of responsibility, and I'm getting better at it.

Jesse Thorn: Was it revelatory for you? Like, when you started doing it, did you think, "Oh, this is going to be my life," or did that realization come on slowly?

Ron Carter: That came on much later. I'm in college now, since it was 1959 or so. I graduated from my undergraduate school and I'm playing in the philharmonic orchestra at that time, in undergrad school. And a very famous conductor walks up to me and says, you know, "Young man, I watched you play. I hear you play well. I'd like you to go to my orchestra where I'm conducting, but they're not ready a colored person to be in an orchestra right now." So, to answer your question: that statement.

Jesse Thorn: And he said it to you in so many words?

Ron Carter: No, no, no, those are the words. I didn't count them all, but in so many words, okay.

Jesse Thorn: So, in a way, this career path wasn't a choice that you made. It was a choice that the circumstances of America in 1959 made for you.

Ron Carter: Yes. Having said that, I was working at a jazz club on a weekend, again, to make sure I had money for the coming term and book costs. And I was in a house band for a small club outside of Rochester, New York, where there was the transportation route from Canada to New York City that jazz bands took to get from traveling on the road back to New York. And being in a house band, I played among, opposite, and with many of the famous—pretty famous jazz guys who were traveling through Rochester to get to New York. Sometimes, they would come as a single, like Sonny Stitt. Sometimes, they would come as a group, and I'd be the bass player who would fill in the group. And each of these groups told me that they thought that New York always needed a good bass player, and that I might fulfill that role if I came to New York.

So, actually, I was being told in so many words that I didn't really count that the classical orchestra was not ready to have people of my ethnic hue. I'm hearing from these guys that, man, New York just wants a good bass player. I felt like I should go fill that role. So, I cut my sheepskin and everything. The ink got dry, and I found a small suitcase club in New York. I packed up my stuff, my wife, and left for New York, August of 1959.

Jesse Thorn: Have you ever wondered whether—you know, had you been 15 years younger or 20 years younger and had been on that same path, whether you would've had a career as a classical musician and that jazz would still be something you did in the evenings, as a job to make a little extra money on the side?

Ron Carter: No, I didn't feel like that. I was gonna either do one or not do it. And when the classical personnel managers decided who was qualified for the orchestra—this ensemble set up next to a jazz group who were saying to me, "If you play it good, you can work in New York." The choices were pretty simple, to me. I didn't think I was wasting my time playing classical music. I learned a whole lot, as I still used most those things as a flitting jazz player. I think now that I'm really too old to kind of break that mold of one of the "first of" people, I'm kind of a little past that stage in my career. Unless I could be called "The Guy Who Played in Tune Every Night". If I could get called that, that's good for me.

Jesse Thorn: It must have been a relief when you started playing jazz as your main thing, when you mostly left aside classical music, to not have to—

Ron Carter: *(Interrupting.)* No, no, no, no, no—now, wait. Wait. That was my only thing. They told me that they weren't interested. Jazz was—yeah, I was—they were telling me. "Hey, man. You're a nice kid." You know, they'd pat me on the head.

"But we're not ready for people who look like your complexion." So, what alliance would have to that kind of concept? I left it twice. No. Uh-uh. I miss the music. I missed the camaraderie that I developed in those groups. But I love where I am. I like being the only bass player in the band.

Jesse Thorn: I was thinking it must have been a relief to no longer be—you know, so to speak—fighting a war on two fronts. Right? That you are—you are working to be a great musician. You are also having to work on, you know, whether you as a Black guy are even welcome—right?—when you're playing classical music. Whether—you know, who around you was judging you, who around you felt like you should or should not be there; it must have been a constant hassle in your life when you were playing classical music. And you know, when you went out to play in a jazz combo with mostly African American players, that wasn't one of the things you had to worry about. You could just worry about making great music.

Ron Carter: You know, you guys ask 12 questions per paragraph.

(Jesse laughs.)

And I never feel I can answer each of them adequately, 'cause they're already gone by the time I get to the crux of the matter. If you can say some of those questions in fewer questions, I can really give you a much better answer without saying, "Well, gee, man. You know—hey, man, I—I—look—I—" I know some answers, but you ask me—break it down for me in a much less, uh—

Jesse Thorn: Sure. Let me try again, Ron.

Ron Carter: Yeah, yeah. Okay, good. Give it a shot.

Jesse Thorn: Was it a relief—?

Ron Carter: *(Interrupting playfully.)* No, no, not yet. *(Beat.)* Okay. Come on, man.

Jesse Thorn: Was it a relief, when you started playing exclusively jazz, that you could focus on music? You no longer had to worry about—or to the same extent had to worry about—

Ron Carter: Okay, stop there. I never felt that I was gonna be on a crusade against the people or the music of the proprietors—hirers of the music who told me twice that they were not ready to accept a person of my hue. I don't carry that burden. Having said that, I still feel I didn't get a chance to do what I thought I was put here to do: play classical cello. Having said that, the community that welcomed

me—I never noticed that they were all Black people. I just said, "These guys want me to play with them. I love that." The classical community was not telling me that. And while I remember that, I'm not letting it be my flag to carry as an example. There were other people before me, guys who had the same issues. I would name them if they were still on the planet, but I know who they are. I'm satisfied that I'm not the only one who had this burden, had this disappointment in their life placed in their laps.

I'm not the only guy, man. And clearly, I'm not the first, 'cause if you look at pictures of the orchestra personnel in the past ten years with the top six or seven orchestras, I doubt that the proportion of minority or people of color would be the same as it would be if they were more open and more actively pursuing talent of the darker community. But they still graduate them to play in the orchestras. Period.

Jesse Thorn: I'll say that it seems to me, as an outsider, like playing in clubs with jazz bands would be more fun than playing in orchestras.

Ron Carter: Man, you don't know what it is, then. You can't imagine being one of seven people playing the same notes with the same fingering, with the same tuxedo, with the same white bowtie and white tails, and watching as one person in front of you with a stick wave his hands like he's having a heart attack. Everyone follows his attempt at beat, and the sound is faaantastic, man.

(Jesse chuckles.)

The only thing even close to that is playing with a great trio, where everyone's on the same radar screen. Everyone's got the same choice of notes. They make their choices. All of the sudden, we're into another level of performance. Incredible.

Jesse Thorn: They're very different things, right? But they're both about something similar, which is that feeling of connection with the other people on stage.

Ron Carter: We got the same notes, man. The difference is, I can pick them when I wanna pick them. And I <u>love</u> that option. Which isn't to say I can't play their choices. It isn't to say I don't want to play their choices. I'm saying I have this line of work because my choices and my presence was not what the personnel director decided fit the complexion, so to speak, of their orchestras. The jazz guys I know, it's, "Hey, man. You play good. You know this tune? Let's play this tune." They didn't say, "Hey, man, what color are you?"

"Do you know Beethoven's 5th?" No, they said, "Hey, man. This is the song for tonight. Play this." I said okay; I can do that. And I did it! As I've been trained to do since 1955 or so.

Jesse Thorn: When you showed up in New York City, coming downstate from Rochester, they had said everybody always needs a good bass player.

Ron Carter: Yes.

Jesse Thorn: Was it true?

Ron Carter: Well, I'm still working!

Jesse Thorn: *(Laughs warmly.)* Well, you are now, but where were you at when you showed up in town with your cardboard suitcase and your base in a thing on wheels, you know?

Ron Carter: My first gig was Chico Hamilton. And I was gonna be hired as a cello player, but the cello player decided he was gonna stay. And the bassist, Wyatt Ruth, decided he wanted to go back home to Seattle and spend his time there. So, Chico said, "Well, hey man, you still playing bass?" Yes! "Join the band as a bass player."

(Music fades in.)

I did. With Eric Dolphy on saxophone and flute, then there's Buddy Mayer on guitar, and Nat Gershwin—a cellist who was in the band at the time—and Chico.

Music: Bright, percussive jazz with a playful tempo. The music continues under the dialogue and then fades out.

Jesse Thorn: Did you know that you were playing with great players?

Ron Carter: I knew they were good players. I didn't know what great meant at that time. So, I don't know.

Jesse Thorn: I mean, I think to some extent—*(chuckling)* to some extent, you have a feeling like "we're doing something important" or "these dudes are for real." But maybe you just felt like, "Hey, this works and we're getting jobs."

Ron Carter: Well, I didn't feel we were. I felt like Chico Hamilton was getting jobs.

(Jesse affirms.)

And I was being hired as a sideman to accompany him as he got the jobs, 'cause I helped him feel the reason a lot of the people hired this band that he was leading. Did I think I was making some wonderful music? I didn't understand what that meant other than: I was learning songs, I was developing my skill. That's the thing—I was deciding where to play these notes on the bass. I was deciding at that point, I needed maybe a little better instrument, 'cause it just wasn't enough for what I thought out here. I didn't understand the rules of the game. Do I need an accountant? Do I need to get a car to get from point A to point B? I learned all those things.

And! I was getting better at playing the bass at the same time.

Jesse Thorn: What were the things that you had to get better at, given that so much of your background was in playing in an orchestra? What were the skills that weren't as refined for you when you started playing jazz full-time?

Ron Carter: In an orchestra, you play what they tell you to play. In a jazz band, after you play the basic format, you're kind of on your own to play what you think the next choices are. So, you have to do two things: have some choices and know when the best choice is to play it. I'm still learning that part.

Jesse Thorn: To what extent were you excited about the fact that in a jazz combo you got to make your own path? And to what extent were you scared about the fact that you were in a jazz combo and there wasn't a conductor telling you what to do?

Ron Carter: I was not afraid. I thought my job was to keep the time, and I've learned how to do that. I was not afraid, because I thought we were—however our experience level was—and I was not the most experienced guy in the quartet, or quintet as it turned out. I'm in a position to be a student. And I've never been afraid of being a student. That's how I got better. That's how I learned more: understanding that there's more to learn, and these three professors who were in front of me—or four professors. They're the ones, right now, who are teaching me in their classroom. Why would I fear that, man?

Jesse Thorn: You've been teaching for a really long time. You know, you've been teaching nearly as long as you've been playing.

Ron Carter: Yes.

Jesse Thorn: When you're teaching young bassists—other than matters of technique, other than bend your finger this way or you wanna— *(Stumbles into a laugh.)* I was gonna say like a music thing like, "You wanna move an eighth up?" or something. I don't know enough about, uh—*(chuckles)* bass-playing technique.

Ron Carter: That's okay. Go ahead.

Jesse Thorn: But I think you know what I'm talking about.

Ron Carter: Yeah.

Jesse Thorn: So, other than that kind of stuff, what do you find is like the most useful thing to help a young player understand?

Ron Carter: As a bass player or as a musician?

Jesse Thorn: As a bass player and musician.

Ron Carter: They're separate things right now, in this discussion. As a bass player, I would tell my students, as I have done before: when you get a call to go to work, leave your ego at home and take a spare pair of ears. Leaving your ego at home means to me you're so intent on doing what your thing is—whatever that is—that the panorama of sound, of choices you have from the other members in the band are no longer your concern. And that can't be the case if you wanna work the following night with this band. *(Chuckles.)* Or the following set. New York's got a reputation of the band changing personnel in the middle of a chorus. Now, that happens as the rumor goes. You know.

As a musician, I try to have the discipline to understand that for the next 60 minutes, you're part of a community. And in this community, everyone has their voice. Saxophone, horn, trumpet, piano. Your job is kind of to understand the language with which they are speaking their point of view. And if you can help them either by changing their point of view by the notes you play, if you can help them change their point of view by the direction of your beat 'cause you think they could be more productive following your beat or your chords, then you have to take that chance and try to make that part of the process. You won't always guess right, 'cause the options are tremendous. But to not to make that choice, and when it comes time for your solo to show what you can do—again, missing the fun of being a really good bass player, having fun. You know, you have these options. And you have the capacity to change the direction of the music with a certain set of notes.

I've been fortunate to experience that two or three times in my short career. And what a great feeling that is.

Jesse Thorn: It sounds like— I hear you describing parts of the job of being a musician being important to you that are like the things you might call "being a pro". Like, you seem like the kind of man who is serious about showing up on time, doing a good job of your job, being supportive to your colleagues. Those kinds of things.

Ron Carter: Yes. I'm trying to be all of those.

Jesse Thorn: Not every talented musician values those things equally. So, what's it like for you—a guy who really cares deeply about that stuff—when you find yourself playing with people who are talented? Whose talent and skill you value and respect, but who don't share the same reverence for whatever it is—showing up on time or being ready when the bell rings. You know?

Ron Carter: To your question— I try to answer this kind of question and not sound like it's all about me, but your question kind of puts it in that zone. So, I'll try to tackle it and not feel uncomfortable. If I can use a quote from a friend of mine who was doing an interview some time ago about his relationship to me in the studio, making records, he said, "Look, when Ron Carter walks into the room, the musical integrity goes up 75%." And I shall leave my answer right there. So, I'll leave it right there.

Jesse Thorn: We'll finish up with the great Ron Carter in just a minute. After the break, he and I will talk about the time he played bass for A Tribe Called Quest on *Low End Theory* and how he gave them the business about swear words. It's *Bullseye* for MaximumFun.org and NPR.

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(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. If you're just joining us, my guest is Grammy award-winning bassist Ron Carter. Maybe the greatest jazz bassist of all time. He's played on iconic records with artists like Miles Davis, Aretha Franklin, Alice Coltrane, and many more. Let's get back into our conversation from just a few years ago.

You've played on thousands of records. A significant majority of those are jazz records, but by no means all of them.

(Music fades in.)

And I'm a big hip-hop fan, and I think you playing on the Tribe Called Quest album *Low End Theory* is like a very important, symbolic thing in hip-hop history.

Music: "Verses from the Abstract" from the album *Low End Theory* by A Tribe Called Quest.

Your demise is coming up and I want your man to watch

Be the prime example, or deeper still the sample

Insignificance, here I'll place you on the mantle

Born up in Harlem, reside down in Jamaica

The girl I used to rock, her moms was a Quaker

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: It's something that people talk about, and it's not just because it's a good track on a good record.

When you got the phone call from—I'm guessing Q-Tip, who did a lot of the production on that record and was the one of the rappers in A Tribe Called Quest—had you ever heard of the man?

Ron Carter: No.

Jesse Thorn: So, how did you figure out whether to take the job?

Ron Carter: I talked to my son, who was into that music way before I was. He said, "Dad, that's one of the guys who belong to this group called A Tribe Called Quest. I think that you'd like the music they have a chance to make if you play with them." So, I said well, that's good enough for me. So, returned his call and I told him, "I might be available. Let's try to work out the timeframe, see if I am available." And we did.

Jesse Thorn: When you went in, what did you and Q-tip talk about in terms of what you wanted to do?

Ron Carter: Not knowing any of the musicians personally and their personalities and not knowing if they understood my kind of dry wit or when I'm being really serious, I explained to them that I had heard a few of the records made by groups like theirs—not theirs. Like theirs. And I objected to their language skills and their social point of view. If I felt that I was gonna be playing on music who did those two things that I object to, I can assure you that my car is parked right outside with the key in the ignition, and I'm ready to go home. See that sign? E-X-I-T? I know what that means. If you don't know what I think it means, you give me those two things I don't wanna hear, and I will show you what E-X-I-T means.

And they understood the humor in it, but they knew I meant it.

Jesse Thorn: And I guess tip was probably 24 years old or something like that. 22 years old.

Ron Carter: I was treating him like an adult, man. You know. I treated him like an adult.

(Jesse affirms.)

Yeah. And he understood that. This elderly gentleman, here with a full beard and wearing these glasses that are a quarter inch thick, he means what he says. And he plays so good that we will tolerate his words, his taste, and not do that. I don't know if that was his comment there to himself, but clearly he thought that my importance was enough that my idiosyncratic, not—distaste for some of the record language skills I heard that I commented I wouldn't find acceptable for me to be a part of, they could work around that. They didn't have to do that to be famous or get more listeners. And I meant it! I was feeling that if they're wanting me to play on this record, they must know some of what I have done and some of my history. And I thought that if I could help them trust my sense of the right sound, the right key, the right zone for the bottom—the bottom part of this record to sound great because of my choice of notes and my use of space, to trust my judgement to do this, we can have a nice time.

So, I asked him, "Read the poem to me. Read the line so I understand where you're breathing and where are your highs and low emotions at this reading of it that you're gonna do for me. And I'll try to make the bass accompany not just you while you're playing, but you while you're not saying anything. I'm really good at filling spaces, man. Let's get this party started." And the rest is history.

Jesse Thorn: Well, Ron Carter, thanks so much for taking all this time to come on. *Bullseye*. It was really nice to get to talk to you.

Ron Carter: Well, thank you for understanding the guy who's got these quarter-inch thick glasses and has got a gray beard. But it's nice to have an open conversation, and I hope you don't edit out some of my comments that you find maybe not to tenor or the alto of the show, you know? *(Chuckles.)*

(Music fades in.)

Jesse Thorn: *(Chuckling.)* Well, thank you. Thanks for taking the time. I really do appreciate it.

Ron Carter: You're welcome.

Music: Lively, upbeat jazz plays under the dialogue.

Jesse Thorn: Ron Carter from 2022. As we said before, the man is going to turn 89 in May. He is still performing. He has residencies coming up in Los Angeles and New York. We'll have a link to his shows on the *Bullseye* page at MaximumFun.org.

That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye* is created in the homes of me and the staff of Maximum Fun, as well as at Maximum Fun Headquarters in the historic jewelry district of downtown Los Angeles, California—where my senior producer Kevin Ferguson has been eyeing a hawk that's been hanging out on the corner of the building across the street from us. He says it should be called Corner Hawk.

The show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer, as mentioned, Kevin Ferguson. Our producers, Jesus Ambrosio and Richard Robey. Our production fellow at Maximum Fun, Hannah Moroz. Our video producer, Daniel Speer. We get booking help from Mara Davis. All our interstitial music comes from our friend Dan Wally, also known as DJW. You can find his music at DJWsounds.bandcamp.com. Our theme music was written and recorded by The Go! Team. It is called "Huddle Formation". Thanks to The Go! Team; thanks to their label, Memphis Industries, for providing it. Our hawk that lives on the corner of the building across the street is Corner Hawk.

You can follow *Bullseye* on Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, where you will find video from just about all our interviews—including the ones you've heard this week. And I think that's about it. Just remember. All great radio hosts have a signature sign-off.

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

(Music fades out.)