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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](http://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. The movie *Sinners* has been out for a little less than a year. In that time, it has brought in \$370,000,000 in ticket sales; it has climbed to the top of countless Best of the Year lists; and now, it is nominated for 16 Oscars. *Sinners* was directed by Ryan Coogler. It stars Michael B. Jordan. Jordan plays twin brothers. They come home to the rural south after a sort of gangland sojourn in the big city and they open a juke joint. And then! The juke joint gets attacked by vampires.

Now, maybe that sounds like a campy horror movie. Yeah, I mean, it has some campy horror movie elements. But it's also an enormous story about faith and the Black experience in the Jim Crow South and the Black experience in America forever ago, forever into the future. And maybe even more than all those things, it is about the transformative and hypnotic power of music. So, it is not a huge surprise to learn that among those 16 nominations, there was one for Best Original Song. The song is “I Lied to You”, written by composer Ludwig Göransson and by my guest, Raphael Saadiq.

Who is Raphael Saadiq, aside from being the guy who wrote one of the biggest movie songs in recent history? He's a singer and songwriter who has made five acclaimed records under his own name. He is a bass player who has played with Prince and Sheila E. He's produced hits for Solange, Angie Stone, The Roots, and Whitney Houston—among others. And perhaps most importantly, with his brother and cousin, he founded Tony! Toni! Toné!, one of the greatest and most exciting groups in R&B history.

**Music:** “Feels Good” from by Tony! Toni! Toné!

*It feels good, yeah*

*It feels good (yeah, yeah, yeah)*

*Oh, it feels good*

*(Music fades out.)*

**Jesse Thorn:** Having a terrific, Oscar-nominated song in a terrific, Oscar-nominated movie is a career highlight for Raphael Saadiq, certainly. And he's grateful for it. But the news comes at a particularly difficult time in his life. In March of last year, just before *Sinners* was released, Saadiq lost his brother and Tony! Toni! Toné! bandmate D'Wayne Wiggins. Then in October, he lost another person close to him. His frequent collaborator D'Angelo died at just 51.

I'm really grateful I had the chance to talk with Raphael Saadiq about all of that and more. Let's get into it by hearing a little bit of his Oscar-nominated song, “I Lied to You”, which is performed by one of the stars of *Sinners*, Miles Caton.

**Music:** “I Lied to You” by Ludwig Göransson and Raphael Saadiq, performed by Miles Caton.

*Somebody take me in your arms tonight*

*Alright, somebody take me in your arms tonight*

*Yeah, yeah, somebody take me to home tonight*

*(Music fades out.)*

**Jesse Thorn:** Raphael Saadiq, welcome to *Bullseye*. I'm so happy to have you on the show. And congratulations on your Oscar nomination.

**Raphael Saadiq:** Thank you, I appreciate it.

**Jesse Thorn:** I mean, that's pretty wild. Do you get the letter in the mail first?

**Raphael Saadiq:** No, it's nothing like that. I thought when you get nominated, they come over with a velvet card invitation.

**Jesse Thorn:** (*Laughing.*) Ed McMahon comes over.

**Raphael Saadiq:** They did it last time. I was nominated in 2018 for *Mudbound*. And in the next hour, I had this invitation that looked like it was in some big, huge, suede card. But this one was just more like a couple friends called me and told me I was nominated. So, that was about it.

**Jesse Thorn:** What's wild about this song to me— This song is the absolute heart of this movie. It also was a job that came to you with like days of notice. (*Laughs.*)

**Raphael Saadiq:** Yeah, days. Yeah, the cool part about it, Ryan and Ludwig—you know, Ryan Coogler and Ludwig Göransson—so cool about it in their approach to talking to me. You know, it felt like if your quarterback gets hurt in the Super Bowl, and then you're like the next quarterback, and the coach just tells you, "All we need you to do is just check it down a couple of times so we can kick the ball." That's how easy they made it sound like. "No pressure, but we're leaving in a day to start shooting this film."

(*Jesse laughs.*)

"And we would like it if you did the song today."

Me, "Right here, right now at this studio"—at Ludwig's Studio. He has an amazing studio. So, it was very comfortable to be there. He has every instrument that I actually love. So, I felt like I was sort of at my own studio.

**Jesse Thorn:** Was there like a germ of an idea that you grabbed from an old notebook or something?

**Raphael Saadiq:** No, not really. I mean, as soon as they start explaining the script—when Ryan started talking about his uncle who really loved the blues and sort of sat him down and started to explain to him what blues meant to Black people back in the day, as far as church and spirituality, and the blues was different. It was like a tug of war between blues and church music. And my stepfather was a blues guy, and my dad was a blues guy. You know? They weren't guys that go to church. My mom would go to church, but my father wouldn't until he was older. My stepdad would never step in a church. But you know, that A-track would have Bobby Blue Bland playing on it, Blowfly, Buddy Guy, Howlin' Wolf.

So, I understood that dynamic when Ryan was sort of telling me about it. So, as they were talking, in my mind, I started to like, “Okay, you have to dig; you have to grab from everything you know. Because you know good blues singers and good blues music.” And I didn't really want to upset the foundation of blues, you know. Of course, I was definitely trying to make it right for the film. But while they were talking, I was already processing what I need to do.

**Jesse Thorn:** Okay. So, in a movie, this is a song that starts as a simple blues record—man and guitar type record—that is, you know, within the world of the film, sung by the main character in the film. And that, over the course of the performance, blows into this huge production number that connects the threads of Black music and Black culture through centuries.

*(Raphael confirms.)*

Like, it is one of the wildest movie scenes I've ever seen. You know? It is an extraordinary explosion. Did they tell you that it was going to be like that? Or was it like them telling you, “You just need to throw a checkdown?” *(Laughs.)*

**Raphael Saadiq:** No, you just need to throw a checkdown. And once the song was done, you know, me and Ludwig sort of jammed for a minute. And you know, I started playing this guitar lick, the lick of the song. He liked it. And we just sort of started jamming and going through it. And then once I started singing it and it was done, that was it. It was done. And I was like, “Okay, bye. And hope they like it.” We listened back a few times. And then I got a phone call from Serena, which is Ludwig's wife. And she's really detailed about the music. She's really into it just as much as Ryan and Ludwig are.

And she called me and she goes, “Well... the song is amazing.” (*Laughing.*) And she was talking really slow!

And I’m on the other line. “Okay, finish.”

She's like, “Yeah, this song is going to be all over the movie. We want to change it.” Then she told me about the sequence she wanted to do that they were going to do. And then Ludwig did that. He sort of went in and took it through every— He told me what he was going to do.

And I didn't watch him do it. I just sort of checked it down. And then once I saw the scene, I was like, “This is crazy.”

**Jesse Thorn:** Like, you cut a demo. You're a super-producer yourself. Look, I’m not asking you to agree with me, but I’m going to call you a super-producer.

*(Saadiq thanks him with a chuckle.)*

But so is Ludwig Göransson.

**Raphael Saadiq:** Yes, he is!

**Jesse Thorn:** And so, you handed him a demo that you had cut in the studio in front of him with Ryan Coogler, with your vocals and everything. And when it next appeared to you, it was the version of this song that explodes into an intergalactic dance record?

**Raphael Saadiq:** Yeah, that's what happened. Yeah.

**Jesse Thorn:** (*Laughing.*) When was it—? Did you hear the song before you saw it in the movie?

**Raphael Saadiq:** No. Well, I didn't ask for a copy because once me and Ludwig played it and just jammed it, I just—I didn't really want to hear it. I could have got a copy, but it's a film. I didn't want it to leak out or something happen; I lose my phone, somebody get a hold to it. And I knew how close it was to their heart. And you know, so I just kind of left it. And I went— I got invited to IMAX. Ryan invited me out to watch it, to screen it. And when I saw it, I was so confused watching it. It wasn't until the second time I saw it at Grand Lake Theater in Oakland. That's when it hit me.

I mean, I knew it was going through all the cultures. And I was really—when I was watching it, I was thinking about all those different eras of music that really, really comes from Africa, early music. They covered—you know, it was from Africa to blues to funk to classical to rock to hip-hop to everything. And you know, every time you watch that film, you see different things happen in that room. So, I think I was more looking at everything that happened in that room, but I could still hear (*bums a bar*). I could still hear that. And I was like, “Wow, that's—”

Yeah, I couldn't— It's hard to wrap my head around it, but you actually put it together better than anybody. (*Laughs.*) Like—so, it just—

**Jesse Thorn:** I mean, like in the film, it's like the roof is blown off, right? And the room is so important. It's played in this juke joint, this big juke joint that is a barn, basically. And to see it at the premiere at the Grand Lake in Oakland—like, the Grand Lake is this big—been there many times—a big movie palace from the, I guess, probably the 30s. And it has that feeling of being a wonderful movie palace. But also, because it's in Oakland—and it is really the pride of Oakland; and Oakland, while it's a very multicultural city, is also a very Black city—it is like suffused with that kind of legacy of Blackness, that place, in the way that that barn is in the movie. You know what I mean?

**Raphael Saadiq:** That's true. It was very loud.

(*Jesse laughs.*)

Every scene, everybody took to it and knew exactly what it felt like. And you know. You know how many times I've walked past Quick Way and then walked past that Grand Lake Theater? I've seen *the Nutcracker* at the Paramount. So, I had so much history of getting on the 580 right there and so much history to watch it like that. But I just think that Ryan had a vision. He had a beautiful vision for it. I just did my part, and he sort of took it and just amplified it with that explosive scene.

**Jesse Thorn:** Raphael, I have to certify your Bay legend status, because you've lived in Los Angeles a long time and you just said, “the 580” instead of “580”.

**Raphael Saadiq:** (*Cackles delightedly.*) The 580! That's all we say is the 580. Yeah, yeah.

**Jesse Thorn:** You're (*unclear*), don't worry.

*(They laugh.)*

Please, no letters.

**Raphael Saadiq:** Yeah, no. Yeah, of course.

**Jesse Thorn:** Ryan Coogler is an Oakland guy as well. Did he tell you that he, you know, grew up with Tony! Toni! Toné! or had that kind of— I mean, there's nobody in the Bay—especially in the East Bay—that doesn't hold Tony! Toni! Toné! in their hearts. You know?

**Raphael Saadiq:** Yeah, he's definitely told me he grew up listening to the music. And his father was a really a good friend of my late brother, D'Wayne, who just passed late last year. And so, there's some kinship in there with Ryan and his father and my brother D'Wayne. And also, my niece Ilahn and Ryan went to, I guess, the same schools or something? And Ryan said he would see my brother D'Wayne picking up his daughter from the school. So, the Bay is small, and a lot of people are doing a lot of different things and playing sports, being doctors, being lawyers.

A lot of music though! There's a lot of music there, and it's a very proud place for music, and I'm really glad I grew up there, you know, through everything. You know, that's how you get good in Oakland. Just that soil has something in it.

**Jesse Thorn:** We're going to take a quick break. When we return, even more with the one and only Raphael Saadiq. Stay with us.

*(ADVERTISEMENT)*

**Promo:**

**Music:** Plucky orchestral music.

**Mark Gagliardi:** Ready, go.

**Hal Lublin:** Knock, knock.

**Mark:** Who's there?

**Hal:** *We Got This.*

**Mark:** With Mark and Hal?!

**Hal:** Oh, you knew this one! *(Giggles.)*

**Mark:** *(Sighs.)* We can't put that out as an ad.

**Hal:** We just did! New episodes every week on [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) or wherever you get your podcasts. Now, it's hewn in rock!

**Mark:** Hewn in rock!?

**Hal:** Yeah! *(Chuckle.)*

**Mark:** How do you hew something in rock?!

**Hal:** With a chisel.

**Mark:** There's only one “hue” in rock, and it's Huey Lewis. *(Chuckles at himself.)*

**Hal:** And the news is: *We Got This with Mark and Hal* is available every week on [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org)!

**Mark:** *(Flatly.)* I walked right into that.

*(They break into quiet laughter.)*

*(Music fades out.)*

**Transition:** Thumpy synth with a syncopated beat.

**Jesse Thorn:** I'm Jesse Thorn. You're listening to *Bullseye*. I'm talking with producer and songwriter Raphael Saadiq.

You grew up in a complicated family situation that I am trying to wrap my head around.

*(Raphael confirms.)*

So, you had how many total siblings and half-siblings?

**Raphael Saadiq:** It's funny when you call it complicated. Growing up, I didn't know it was complicated until I got older. I started saying it, and people go like, "What?!"

**Jesse Thorn:** You started charting it out for people? *(Chuckles.)*

**Raphael Saadiq:** Yeah. No, yeah. So, my dad was— My father had already had eight kids before he met my mom. And when he was divorced, he met my mom. And I'm the only kid by my mom and my dad. My mom had three kids, all born in Louisiana— Monroe, Louisiana. I'm the only kid born a city boy, born in Oakland. My brother D'Wayne, who I was in the Tonys with, that's my dad's kids from his mom— D'Wayne's mom. Those boys were like Alvie, Randy, Desmond, and D'Wayne. And Alvie was a singer. He was a country singer. Randy was a soul singer, singing like Eddie Kendricks, Stylistics. That's where I kind of get that from. And D'Wayne was a singer and a guitar player. And that's who I sort of modeled everything after.

He was the one I watched the most, tried to hang around him a lot. And then it was four girls on that side—Lynn, Sheila, Loretta, and Anita. *(Correcting himself.)* D'Anita. So, those—yeah, that was that. And it was a crazy dynamic, because I really liked being—hanging out over there in East Oakland and Royal Park. Now, my family—my mom's side was my sister Janice, my sister Sarah—who was a blues singer—and my brother, JimmyLee, which I wrote an album called *JimmyLee*. My brother had this huge drug addiction, and I made this album about him. So, that's the dynamic of my family. So, I was always either around my side of the family or D'Wayne's side of the family.

**Jesse Thorn:** Your first job-jobs were playing with gospel quartets, right?

**Raphael Saadiq:** That's it. The Gospel Hummingbirds.

**Jesse Thorn:** Were you like 16 years old?

**Raphael Saadiq:** Nine. Nine/ten. Ten. The Gospel Messengers.

**Jesse Thorn:** And you're playing with like 55-year-old men?

**Raphael Saadiq:** Yeah, at nighttime, at eight o'clock on a school day, we get the rehearsal. So, MacArthur and Belvedere, you walk into a garage and open up, amp is already there—acoustic amp. It's called acoustic. And plug it up, and Mr. Thomas said— When I first started playing, he was an older guy who played a gold Stratocaster. And he said, “Look, son, I’m going to teach you this bass line.” He goes *(sings a bar)*. He said, “If you play that on every song—whether it's slow or it's fast—you're going to be in the right place.” And that was my training from Mr. Thomas.

And then I started playing with this group called the Gospel Hummingbirds, which was Roy Tyler—who was a legend in Oakland—and Joe Thomas was the guitar player. His dad, Joe Thomas Sr., it was his group at first, and then his son took over and played guitar. And he was my mentor. And he played jazz under Bill Bell at Alameda Junior College. So, in that group, he would always bring in these jazz songs and kind of interfuse them with the quartet. So, I was learning like “Birdland” and all these songs. I didn't know who they were by.

And once I got to high school, I was playing trombone and jazz band. And I’m reading it, and then I’m like, “Oh, I already know this song. I know “Birdland,”. I know this. So, quartet was definitely my foundation that I learned so much from.

**Jesse Thorn:** Were you playing bass because your big brother was playing guitar?

**Raphael Saadiq:** Exactly. I was playing bass because that was the only way I could hang around D’Wayne. I couldn’t— I needed a reason to hang around him. And he already played guitar. He was already amazing. He showed me how to play bass. He told my father, “He could play. you should buy him a bass. If you don't buy him a bass, I'll buy it myself.” Which he couldn't buy it, you know.

*(Jesse laughs.)*

He couldn't buy it, but it was—but my father took me to Leo's Music. It was the most famous store on Telegraph, right across the street from Caspers Hot Dogs, and bought me this bass that—it wasn't a Fender Jazz; it was a copy of a Fender Jazz. You know, everybody in Oakland wanted to be Larry Graham.

**Jesse Thorn:** Right. From Graham Central Station and Sly & the Family Stone.

**Raphael Saadiq:** From Graham Central Station and Sly & the Family Stone. And so, I just knew my bass looked like a Fender Jazz, but it actually wasn't. It was a bass called Orlando. And that was my first bass. And you couldn't have told me that I didn't have a Fender Jazz bass like Larry Graham.

**Jesse Thorn:** Did you and D'Wayne have dreams of having a group?

**Raphael Saadiq:** Well, D'Wayne was already in a group called Alpha Omega. And I was in another band. I was in several bands when I was growing up. *(Beat.)* I had a dream to be in a band with my brother. And it happened. I met this guy on the bar train one time, and I had my bass with me, and he goes, "Man, what do you want to do? What's your dream? Just what do you want to do?"

And I go, "I want to be in a band with my brother."

He says, "Why don't you just ask him?"

So, I did. We became this band and we added Tim and we created the Tonys. But I remember, we was recording and we made a record, and we were at the studio—true story—a studio that we always worked at before we became pretty popular. And I was walking down the stairs to the studio in his house. That same guy on the bar train was walking up the stairs and he said, "You're welcome."

*(Jesse cackles.)*

But I've never seen him again! He just disappeared. It was weird.

**Jesse Thorn:** The first thing that you and your brother did that was big-time was not Tony! Toni! Toné!, but going on tour in the band of Sheila E., another Oaklander. How did you get that job?

**Raphael Saadiq:** Well, I just think— We were at that same studio, this guy named Joe Caper's house.

**Jesse Thorn:** And you're still teenagers, right?

**Raphael Saadiq:** In Oakland Hill. Yes, definitely 17/18 I was, I think. Well, I got the gig. D'Wayne didn't get the gig. It was just me. But D'Wayne took me to San Francisco to audition. They just didn't need another guitar player. They had Levi Seacer playing.

And Levi Seacer was her musical director. He called Joe Caper's house and said, "Is there anyone here that can play bass and sing and dance?" It was a take from the *Purple Rain* movie, like *Morris Day*. "Can anybody sing and dance?"

And I was like, "Yes, me. I can do it."

And so, we went to San Francisco right off of Folsom to SIR. I auditioned. It was so many people outside dressed like Prince and crazy hats on, boots on. I talk about it in my one-man show how people had on all these terrible Prince boots and holes in their jeans and crazy Prince hats. And I had on some 501s, a Detroit baseball cap, and some jacket. And went in there and sort of walked in there with my base not ready. And Sheila looked at me like I was kind of cocky because I didn't come out with it on my shoulders. But... I didn't do that because in quartet, you walk in a place, and you don't pull out your bass until you're ready. I walked in, and I started playing, and we started jamming in A natural.

Then they took me through another test, and then Levi looked at me and said, "You have the gig."

**Jesse Thorn:** I mean, that is like to start your career. I mean, obviously you had been playing locally. You'd been playing with The Gospel Hummingbirds and stuff. But like to really start your career at a production of that level?! Like—*(laughs.)*

**Raphael Saadiq:** Yeah. I was very lucky.

**Jesse Thorn:** A Prince and Sheila E. tour?

**Raphael Saadiq:** Yeah, I was very lucky and very fortunate. Because it was the top of Prince's career. It was right after *Purple Rain*. So, it was the *Under the Cherry Moon* tour. And Sheila was at the top of her game, and she's a hard worker even today. But she would make us rehearse sometime, you know, 14/15 hours.

**Jesse Thorn:** And she's a lifelong pro. You know? Like—

**Raphael Saadiq:** She's a pro. She was a pro before that. She was a pro—

**Jesse Thorn:** She was a pro when she was five years old or whatever.

**Raphael Saadiq:** —before Prince. She's a childhood prodigy. So, she knew about hard work. You know, her dad is a legend, Pete Escovito. And the whole family are musicians, right? So, yeah, I walked into a situation where I could only learn more.

**Jesse Thorn:** The first hit single that Tony! Toni! Toné! had was also your first lead vocal, right? “Little Walter”?

*(Raphael confirms then laughs.)*

Were you— I mean, I just watched the video for “Little Walter” earlier today. And you're onscreen; you look like a deer in the headlights.

*(Raphael cackles.)*

I'm sure they have multiple takes to pull from too.

**Raphael Saadiq:** Oh my god! Yeah. Oh, you understand.

**Jesse Thorn:** You look terrified to be there.

**Raphael Saadiq:** Terrified. Terrified. I mean, I had—it was— No, I don't think it was a lot of takes. I think we gave the production company—I don't know, maybe it was \$60,000 or \$100,000 for three videos. That was “Little Walter”, “Baby Doll”, and “Born Not to Know”. So, that production had to shoot all the videos. So, it wasn't like it was... They were really good shoots, but I think the night before we had came up with a routine to play, to move around, and what we were going to do in the video. And so, I was in ROTC for four years, and I was on a drill team. So, a lot of the moves, like the kicking the leg around the ankle and that movement, it was really some of my drill team stuff that I used from drill teams. So, I used a little bit of that. I was a huge fan of Mickey from the group, The System. So, I just watched Mickey a lot, and I had drill team moves. *(Laughs.)*

**Jesse Thorn:** Alright. But when you were in the— Let me ask you about being in the studio singing that song. Did you put yourself forward to sing the lead on that?

**Raphael Saadiq:** No.

**Jesse Thorn:** How did you end up singing the lead?

**Raphael Saadiq:** How I ended up singing the lead was we were recording in East Oakland, 82nd, maybe five blocks from where I went to high school. We just signed a deal with Denny and Tommy. It was a production deal. We were all supposed to show up at Tommy's dad's house. I was the only one that showed up for the first day. And we wrote the song there. I came up with the hook, because “Little Walter”— Because when I played with Prince, we had a small offer to play in his group called Madhouse and be the band. But that band, they was going to wear a mask. So, I don't even think I even thought about it or considered it.

But Prince—when we went home, Prince told Levi Seacer, “Tell the guys when they go home, they should listen to The Chamber Brothers. Listen to The Chamber Brothers.” So, as soon as I got home, I went to Leopold's in Berkeley and bought every Chamber Brothers record I could find. And I heard this record, “Wade in the Water”, the way they did it. And when I got in the studio, Denny and Tommy were coming up with music. And I just remembered that song, and I just changed it to “Hey, little Walter,” singing about the possibilities of endangering yourself by selling drugs in Oakland.

**Music:** “Little Walter” by Tony! Toni! Toné!.

*Hey, little Walter, listen*

*Hey, little Walter*

*Something's gonna getcha, little Walter*

*He started coming up with clothes I could not buy*

*And I some I could not find*

*Taking girls to dinner two at a time (hey)*

*I didn't pay no mind*

*(Music fades out.)*

**Jesse Thorn:** I mean, the thing about this record—which was Tony! Toni! Toné!'s first significant hit, your first lead—is it was in and of itself reflective of the themes that came up later in *Sinners*.

**Raphael Saadiq:** Yeah!

**Jesse Thorn:** Because you're talking about— You know, this is a gospel record, “Wade in the Water”. You're talking about having heard it in the context of 1960s psychedelic rock-soul, The Chambers Brothers. And you were reinterpreting it for the streets in the early '90s.

**Raphael Saadiq:** Yeah, exactly. Yeah. There's a lot of similarities with *Sinners*, with even the hymn vibe of, you know, *(humming the of “I Lied to You” back-to-back with “Wade in the Water”)*. “*(Singing)* Wade in the water.” I could sing both of them together. It felt like, you know, we were pulling from ancestors. It had to happen like that. And our last tour, the Tony's last tour—and you know, my brother, he was sick at the time. But he never told me. He never told anybody. I think somebody knew, but we didn't know. And I remember doing an interview on the radio station and we played in Memphis, and Memphis felt like it was just wall-to-wall, just Black people. And there was a few white people in there, but it looked like they were with the CIA. It looked like a Malcolm X movie.

I mean, I say that to say it looked like the movie *Malcolm X*, but they was just fans, right? But it was people pressed up against the wall. But it felt like it was this ancestor thing. Just people really like—you know, like they hadn't seen us or heard music like this since back in the day. And the people that came was like, “I want to go see Black people sing and really play music, play instruments.”

And so, I said at the radio station, I said, “Man, I just felt like it was ancestors. I felt the spirit, like it was these people just staring and looking at me from the time the curtain opened. We were just standing there. You could just see people like *(whisper cheers)*, and I could feel all these ancestors just coming in the building.”

And D'Wayne looks at me and goes, “I like where you coming from, man.”

But now when I think about it, what he meant— It warmed him to feel like we was talking about something that he was on his way to, right? So, I think this whole time I've been on this journey spiritually, musically. And *Sinners* fell right. It came to me at the right time.

**Jesse Thorn:** We'll wrap up my conversation with Raphael Saadiq on the other side of the break. As we mentioned, he has had a year of incredible loss. That includes losing his brother and Tony! Toni! Toné! bandmate, D'Wayne Wiggins. We'll talk about it.

(ADVERTISEMENT)

**Promo:**

(*Sci-fi beeping.*)

**Music:** Playful synth.

**Adam Prianca:** *Greatest Trek* is the hit podcast about new *Star Trek* shows. And right now, we're talking about all things *Starfleet Academy*.

**Ben Harrison:** *Starfleet Academy* is a *Star Trek* show made for everyone, from lifetime *Star Trek* nerds to folks who only like *My So-Called Life* and *Dawson's Creek*.

**Adam:** We even had a special writer and actor guest for the fifth episode this season. The hilarious Tawny Newsome!

**Ben:** Look, there's always something fun on the *Greatest Trek* feed, because when the season's over, we're going back to watching *The Original Series*!

**Adam:** And hey, if you like old *Star Trek*, the *Greatest Generation* just had its 10th anniversary!

**Ben:** That's *Greatest Trek* for new *Star Trek* and *Greatest Generation* for the *Star Trek* you grew up on.

**Adam:** Both shows you can find on [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org).

*(Sci-fi beeping.)*

*(Music ends.)*

**Transition:** Bright, chiming synth with a syncopated beat.

**Jesse Thorn:** It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is Raphael Saadiq. He's a bassist and producer who's worked with D'Angelo, Prince, Erykah Badu, and innumerable others.

You said you didn't know that your brother was sick when you did that last Tony! Toni! Toné! Tour.

*(Raphael confirms.)*

What got you guys to the finish line of touring as Tony! Toni! Toné!? Like, what— It had been many years since you had performed, the three of you, as Tony! Toni! Toné!

**Raphael Saadiq:** Well, to be honest, we always wanted to do it, and I just didn't— He was already out touring and making money, and he loved doing it by himself. He loved being out there. Because he didn't want it just to go away. And we've just never seen eye to eye on how to handle day-to-day things. And he loved the Tony's even more than I did, and he was a frontman too. So, for me, I told him—I said, “Man, like I love you.” That's my brother. You know? Definitely we could have made a lot of money together, but I didn't want the business to destroy our relationship. So, I said I'd rather— I said, “Now you have the Tonys, and I'm just doing whatever I'm going to do.”

Because I didn't know what I was going to do. I left and started another group. But I told him, I said, “You know, now I have you as a brother and the business can't destroy that. So, you go ahead and do that, and I'll just figure out what I'm going to do.”

But eventually we got into some lawsuit with this ridiculous claim about some music that wasn't true from some people in the family. And then we were going through this

lawsuit together, me and him, fighting the ops. And we looked at each other like, “Let's do a tour.” (*Laughs.*) And that was like—you know, we wanted to do it anyway. And you know, he said, “Let's do it.” And as soon as we got together, man, it was just crazy. It was like—we didn't know any of that was happening. You know? He came to rehearsal every day. You know. He was flying in and out going to doctors. We didn't know. But every night he would get up there and sing and not let us feel anything. You know?

Just a remarkable, strong guy, man. I don't know if I would be like that, but he was like that. But we all really knew—me and Tim knew, like separately, we all can make it. But nothing was like the three of us. The three of us was powerful. You know, when we stand together—we could be at a coffee shop, me and D'Wayne, in Lakeshore. And people would see us sitting together, it would be like we were singing. They would just stop and go, “Oh, oh! They're together!” You know?

So, that's what brought it together. And I really wanted to do it, because nobody had heard the Tonys the way they should hear it. And I wanted to put together the band with the expertise I learned from being away from it and putting it together. And I put a great team behind them, and we put the fire behind his (*sensor beep*) when he was singing. You know, we was pushing him out there. (*Laughs.*) He was just like— You know, we was putting it behind him, and it was beautiful to like—to send him off the way the Tonys should have always been heard.

**Jesse Thorn:** When did you find out?

**Raphael Saadiq:** Wow. (*Sighing.*) Oof. (*Beat.*) I found out after the tour. I found out after the tour. Somebody called me and told me they didn't—“Did you know your brother had cancer and was sick?”

And I was like, “No, I didn't know.” I was just—I was just... scared and everything. I was just— I couldn't even go to sleep. I couldn't go to sleep. And then when I talked to him, um... (*softly*) yeah. (*Sniffing softly.*) Yeah.

But I did talk to him. And you know, in Pro D'Wayne style, he was like, “Man— I'm good, man. I'm not worried about this. You know? Whatever it is, I'm ready.” And he was like that. He sort of tried to make me feel good about it And we talked a couple times, and then he went dark, and he didn't talk to anybody after that. And I saw him

in the hospital— No, I saw him at home I went to his house. And, um—God, he just... He, um—he said to me, he said, um... He just looked at me, and so I hugged him.

It was just the only time we was in a room together by ourselves, because his son and his daughter—his son Dylan and Jaden and Ilhan—was waiting to come in. This was at his house. And he looks at me and goes... he said, “Man, you know what? We did a lot.”

And I was like, “(Censor beep.)” I said, “We did. We did.” And I walked out and I did what I’m doing now, just teared up. Just like, (*whispered*) wow. That was it.

**Jesse Thorn:** Almost to the very end, he was big brothering you.

**Raphael Saadiq:** (*Sighs.*) Even right now. Even now. Yeah, aaall the time.

**Jesse Thorn:** You must have been glad that you had that chance to get back on stage as the Tonys and... even though you didn't realize it at the time, get to share that special thing that you made together.

**Raphael Saadiq:** (*Sniffles.*) Man, it's even hard to look at the pictures. Like, we filmed every show. And some of those nights... (*sighs softly*) some of them nights, he couldn't even get through a song. And, um—we didn't know why. We thought like (*huffs a soft laugh*) maybe he smoked that joint. He's just like— He told us he lost his voice or something, but that wasn't it. But he was relentless to the end. Like you know, he was still trying to go to shows. He was playing after we got done! (*Chuckles.*) He went back on tour with the other guys he played with. And you know, he's doing shows, showing up in a wheelchair. He was like— He wanted to do it ‘til he died. That was his thing. You know?

But I’m glad we got a chance to do that tour. Because it was powerful, people got a chance to see him. (*Beat.*) Yeah, people got a chance to see him, and it was amazing. I was glad that, at the Grammys, I got a chance to put the picture up of him. You know, ‘cause there wasn't a picture. And I was like, “I need to get a picture of my brother up.” And the picture that went up, I had it in my phone. And it's funny, we did that photo session— We did a whole photo session for that album—(*correcting himself*) I mean, for that tour. And I called him and said, “Man, your pictures look amazing. You look beautiful. You took the best pictures out of all of us three.” (*Chuckles.*) And I had

these favorite pictures, and I had these pictures in my phone, and I gave one to the producer of the show. And I was like, “Use this picture.”

**Jesse Thorn:** I was really glad to see you playing at the Grammys and to see your brother's picture and also to have the chance to see such a beautiful tribute to D'Angelo, with whom you worked a lot. But I'm sure that you didn't want to be in the position to be the one that's standing onstage remembering.

**Raphael Saadiq:** Nah. Nuh-uh. *(Beat.)* No, man. It's like when I went to rehearse with Lauryn Hill, and I got the call and this guy by the name Sharkey Isaiah, who played with the Vanguard—amazing guitarist; he's an artist, too. And, um—

**Jesse Thorn:** D'Angelo's band.

**Raphael Saadiq:** Yeah, D'Angelo's band, right. The Vanguard. You know, I was like—I wanted to do it if Pino—the bass player, you know—if Palladino would have played and some of his band—you know, and Anthony Hamilton and all those guys. And we got there to do it. And when I got there, I realized why I was there. And I just kind of *(sighs)*. It was kind of like surreal at that time. And it was just losing my brother, then losing D. I was trying to be strong, but it was rough, man. It was rough.

I saw D—I saw D'Angelo. We call him D. His name is Michael Archer. I call him Mike. *(Chuckles.)* You know, I've been knowing Mike since he first came out. I think I'm one of the first people that ever worked with him, outside of some of the musicians that probably played on his first album. He came to Sacramento and we recorded “You Are My Lady” in my garage. You know? And I seen an innocent guy who I told him—I said, “You're not gonna—I don't think you really built for this. And there's no book to prepare you for the future of what it is.” But yeah, it was hard. I saw him in the hospital; I was on tour doing a one-man show.

And I almost didn't go see him, because I didn't want to see him like that. I had just said bye to my brother. And they told me I should come up, and I went to see him. And he was, you know, pretty much a few days away from leaving us. And the first day I just got there, I just kind of sat in the room. He was asleep. I just sat there for maybe an hour. I didn't want to try to wake him up, and I left to try to go do something. You know. Then the next day I came back and he was up when I came in. And he got off the bed. He got off the bed and said, “Lift me up,” and he got up and

sat under the bed and... he sat under the bed and was like just talking about all the things that—I was pretty much dressed up; he was like, “Man, you clean, man!”  
*(Chuckles.)*

And yeah, we talked and he, um— I was talking about The Ohio Players, this song that I really like. I think it was a song called “Together”. And I was talking about that song. He was like, “Have you ever heard the live version of it?” He was like, “Look it up!”

So, I looked it up on YouTube, and he was just sitting there just like going through—*(chuckling)* you know, just going through all the parts. You know? I was like—*(chuckles)* you know, he’s going through all the parts, just funking all the way out. And I told him that I was practicing piano. And he said, “Hey, what you’re playing right now?” He said, “I was playing that when I was probably like 12.” He said, “But once I started playing it, I knew there was no turning back.” And he looked at me and said, “There’s no turning back now. You got to keep playing.” He was always inspirational like that, but it was hard.

We talked for a long time. He was eating some fruit. He asked me to get him some more. And it was just, you know, Angie Stone, D, and my brother. I was just like— It was a lot to take in, but I was just trying to be as strong as I could for him. But I’m glad we got a chance to write music together. You know, we were on “Untitled” together. I can’t believe that he’s gone. He was, uh... *(puffs a loud sigh)* I mean, the plans that he had that I heard from some of his band? You know, what he wanted to do. And he wanted to do this big tour. And he told me at the hospital, “I’m coming to LA. I’ll see you in LA.”

And I said, “Yeah, I’ll see you in LA.” And I do, I see him. You know?

**Jesse Thorn:** I mean, both D’Angelo and your brother and Angie Stone, they’re unbelievable losses; but they’re such parts of this tapestry, this cultural tapestry that we’ve been talking about. This is work that will live through generations.

**Raphael Saadiq:** Yeah, it’s true.

**Jesse Thorn:** And I mean tied together. Like, not just people are going to remember “Untitled” when it comes on their radio. I mean... these people are tied into a culture that goes back hundreds of years and will go forward hundreds of years.

**Raphael Saadiq:** No, they definitely are. I mean, when I listen to my brother and I listen to Angie and I listen to D—I mean, I could put on this record, “Higher”.  
*(Chuckles.)* I put it on, the last couple nights I've been listening to “Higher”. I've been listening to “Africa”. I've been listening to The Vanguard album. For a while, it took me a minute to be able to turn those records on and just go like— This is like—was this tree of branches with all these different things on it. You know. It's definitely going to live forever. Like you said, it's a makeup that's a part of centuries. Centuries. You know?

We're just vessels, man. We're here to do what we do. And to give much love and clarity to everyone. Music has saved my life. Music is saving people's lives today. So, I do agree with you on that.

**Jesse Thorn:** Well, Raphael Saadiq, I'm really grateful for all the time you gave me and for your open-heartedness. Thank you for talking to me.

**Raphael Saadiq:** Thank you. Thank you. Appreciate that. Thank you.

**Jesse Thorn:** Raphael Saadiq. You can hear his work in Ryan Coogler's brilliant film, *Sinners*, which is streaming now.

Hey guys, how about we go out on my favorite collaboration between Raphael Saadiq and D'Angelo—with all apologies to “Untitled”—which is a solo track from Saadiq that features D'Angelo called “Be Here”.

**Music:** “Be Here” from the album *Instant Vintage* by Raphael Saadiq, featuring D'Angelo.

*Oh, girl, you should just be here*

*(Girl, you know you drive me crazy)*

*You should be here in the morning time*

*When I'm making my breakfast*

*You should be here beneath me*

*To feel me, to heal me*

*You should be here*

*To wrap me, to trap me*

*(Music plays under the dialogue.)*

**Jesse Thorn:** That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye*, created in the homes of me and the staff of Maximum Fun and at Maximum Fun HQ in the historic Jewelry District in downtown Los Angeles, California. Here in Los Angeles, it has been raining so hard that the Silver Lake Trader Joe's flooded. You have no idea how important this Trader Joe's is to the cultural life of Los Angeles. *(Laughs.)*

Our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. And our producers, Jesus Ambrosio and Richard Robey. Our production fellow at Maximum Fun, Hannah Moroz. Our video producer, Daniel Speer. 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](http://DJWsounds.bandcamp.com). Our theme music, written and recorded by The Go! Team; that is called "Huddle Formation". Thanks to The Go! Team. Thanks to their label, Memphis Industries.

Check out *Bullseye* on Instagram, Tik'Tok, and YouTube, where you will find video of these interviews—the perfect way to share these interviews if you thought they were cool! 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](http://MaximumFun.org) and is distributed by NPR.

*(Music fades out.)*

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