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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. If you have the time, I want you to try something. Go to your favorite search engine and type the phrase “migrant farm workers” and then click on images. Look at the photos. There are thousands of them. You will see some patterns. Almost all the photographs are set in a lush, green field, mid harvest. And almost every photo has multiple people in the shot, sometimes dozens. And the people in the photos are almost always doing the same thing—they're hunched over, picking strawberries or radishes or lettuce. Can you make out their faces? Maybe a few, but basically these are landscape shots. And if you click over to the webpage where that photo appears, does it say anything about who the people in the picture are, why they work where they work? Even just their names? Probably not.

My guest, Noé Montes, noticed that too. Noé's parents worked on farms when he was growing up, and he remembers moving around the southwest as the seasons changed. He lived and worked with the people in those photographs. And when he, as a middle-aged adult, became a full-time fine art photographer, he made it a point to show those people as people, not objects in a landscape. Noé Montes's work extends beyond portraits of farm workers, of course. He has made incredible pictures in the studio. He has made beautiful landscapes, some incredible street photography. If you live in southern California, you can see some of that work now at the Riverside Art Museum. *Noé Montes: Regional History* runs there through April 19th.

I've known Noé for almost 20 years, and I met him through this show. So, I am thrilled to finally have the chance to interview him. Let's get right into it.

Transition: Bright synth with a syncopated beat.

Jesse Thorn: Noé Montes, welcome to *Bullseye*. I'm so happy to see you, so happy to have you here. And congratulations on the show.

Noé Montes: Thank you for having me on the show.

Jesse Thorn: How did you find photography?

Noé Montes: After high school, I got a degree in electronics. So, at the time I was working as an electronic repair person for a company that made lasers. I was around 20 years old.

Jesse Thorn: And this was an associate's degree in (*chuckling*) agricultural lasers.

Noé Montes: That's right.

Jesse Thorn: Like, I wanna set the context here.

Noé Montes: Yeah, yeah, you're right. So, lasers are used in land leveling in agriculture and construction. The lasers aren't doing any cutting or anything. They are used as a reference.

Jesse Thorn: Right.

Noé Montes: So, that's the kind of equipment that I was working on. This was in Yuma, Arizona, where I lived at the time. I was working in that field. I was 20 years old. After about a year I was like, "Oh my God, this is just what I'm gonna do for the rest of my life. I don't really think I can do that."

And I had always had an interest in art ever since I was young. But the environment that I grew up in, it wasn't something that was nurtured or encouraged, for no other reason than it just wasn't like that. I didn't know any artists, anything like that. But I always had an interest in it. So, I started taking a community college classes after work, at the local community college in Yuma. I took a painting class; I took a jazz appreciation class. I just started taking classes of things that I had an interest in. And then I took a photography class, and I immediately really took to it. I really liked it. It was an analog photo class, so we were developing film and making prints by hand with chemistry. I just really loved it.

I would spend the entire night—I'd go into the dark room at 8PM and come out like at 3 in the morning and not realize that all that time had passed. And then that was just making the pictures. And taking the pictures was also really interesting to me. So, that's kind of how I came to photography.

Jesse Thorn: How did you come to think of it as something you could do for a living?

Noé Montes: That has been a really long journey that has taken many steps and leaps of faith, I guess? I just kept doing it. I kept doing it over decades—you know, doing different kinds of work and then eventually moving further and further into practicing photography, doing photography as work and as a creative practice. That involved learning photoshop and doing digital editing and processing for other companies, for stock agencies, et cetera. And also, working here in Hollywood as a photography assistant, a production assistant—working in production here in Los Angeles—and eventually kind of figuring out how I could be in the world as a photographer in a way that worked for me, both financially and as well as being able to balance all the other things in my life—my relationships and my family and all of these things.

Jesse Thorn: I mean, you are talking about both having become an artist as a 20-year-old, 30-35 years ago, and also... really starting your career as an artist, as a 40-year-old, 10 or 15 years ago.

Noé Montes: Yeah. That is interesting.

Jesse Thorn: I guess I'm saying that there's not a lot of people who come on this show who I would consider to be early career artists who are also people in their 50s.

Noé Montes: Hm. I've often felt that I'm about 10 or 15 years, in terms of my career as an artist, behind what—I don't know, some of my peers or other people my age that have gotten here in a different way, through education. I didn't go to college for art. But I guess one of the things that I feel now is that I've been doing it for such a long time that some of the things that I've lacked in the past, in terms of becoming a successful artist, I'm starting to be able to overcome them just by having been making art for so long. You know, doing it rigorously, conscientiously, and honestly.

Jesse Thorn: One of the first big projects that you did as a conscious choice to make a capital 'A' Art was a body of work called Cuyama. And there's a number of pictures from that project that are at the Riverside Art Museum. This was 10-15 years ago now. Tell me about where Cuyama is and what drew you to that place.

Noé Montes: The Cuyama Valley is a small, agricultural valley. It's a rural community that is located roughly between where Bakersfield is and Santa Maria, which is north of Los Angeles for about—I don't know, about two/two-and-a-half hours. It's kind of hidden in a little pocket in between some mountains there.

I initially started working there with a nonprofit organization called the Blue Sky Center. And in fact, I'm still working with the Blue Sky Center there. I'm still

working and collaborating with them, there in the valley. But at the time the Blue Sky Center was just starting out. Like, it has just—the organization had just been seed funded and they were trying to figure out how they were going to exist, what their relationship to the community was. And their community was made up of a couple different demographics. One of them was the farm worker community. Because it is a valley that has a lot of commercial agriculture, there are a lot of farm workers there that are immigrants from Mexico, from different states in Mexico.

Jesse Thorn: What in your own life connected you to farm worker communities in California?

Noé Montes: I actually grew up in a family of farm workers. I worked as a farm worker, myself. My parents are both from the state of Michoacán in Mexico. They came here in the early '70s to work in the fields—to work in the fields and orchards of California. And more specifically, we—our family, my siblings and my parents, but also our extended family; lots of aunts and uncles and cousins—we were migrant farm workers. Which means that we moved around following harvests. We moved on average every six months. We would move to a different place in the state of California, sometimes down to Arizona, because there's citrus and lettuce there. So, just following different harvests of fruits and vegetables.

Jesse Thorn: Is that cycle still sort of in your mind?

Noé Montes: It is, actually. It definitely is. Sometimes— I've been here in LA for 25 years now, and I'll go to the farmer's market, and I'll see cherries, and my mind immediately says, “Oh, it's May.” Like, I know when the different crops are harvested from that. That's where I grew up for my entire childhood and adolescence. I started actually working in the fields myself probably somewhere between like around eight years old, and then I did that into my teen years until I got my first non-farm working job, which was at Kmart in Lodi, California.

Jesse Thorn: Did you work alongside both your parents?

Noé Montes: We did. We all worked together until I was 12 years old. And when I was 12 years old, I looked old enough that I was able to work under my own name and get my own paycheck. But it still went into my family's finances.

Jesse Thorn: So, like your parents were paid by what they harvested, and so if you were working alongside them, you could effectively throw it in their basket?

Noé Montes: That's right. It's called contract or per-unit work. And yeah, you could all kind of pitch into the same buckets or bins. Sometimes we picked pears in big bins. But there was that kind of work, and then there was also hourly work.

And that's where I could work under my own name at that age and draw my own paycheck.

Jesse Thorn: Did your parents have status from being in the Bracero program or something like that?

Noé Montes: My parents—my dad initially came to the US as a Bracero. Like, for a very short period. I think he was a Bracero at the very tail end of that program,

Jesse Thorn: This was a program to give legal immigration status to migrant farm workers who were working seasonally in the United States. So—

Noé Montes: That's right, and the government worked with the farmers here in the United States to contract. So, they would ask for a certain number of people that they needed for this particular period of time. And then, the governments working together would bring over those people that were being requested.

So yeah, that was actually the way a lot of Mexican people, specifically men, came to the United States to work initially. Now we're here, now we're everywhere. *(Chuckles.)* All the second and third generations of us, of those families.

Jesse Thorn: We're gonna take a break. We'll be back soon with more from photographer Noé Montes. Keep it locked. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

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Transition: Bright synth with a syncopated beat.

Jesse Thorn: Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is Noé Montes. He's a photographer based in LA. He's been working for 25 years. He has a terrific new solo exhibition at the Riverside Art Museum in Riverside, California. *Noé Montes: Regional History* runs now through April 19th. Let's get back into our conversation.

You've photographed farm worker communities in Cuyama, California and in the Coachella Valley in California, both of which are sort of a few hours from Los Angeles. When you started on those projects, what did you want to do that was different from other photographs and artworks that you had seen about farm workers?

Noé Montes: Well, one thing that was interesting is that it took me quite a bit of time to come around to want to make work about farm workers. And uh—

Jesse Thorn: Because you were self-conscious about it?

Noé Montes: Because I was self-conscious about it. Because I had certain ideas about myself as an artist and didn't want to be put in a box as this kind of artist, or that only works in these themes, et cetera. Something that I think I've worked out, (*chuckles*) to some degree still working out. But when I did eventually come to work with intention on a project about farm workers, one of the important ideas that I was working with was that I did not want to represent farm workers in the ways that I had seen them represented before visually. Which was almost anonymously. Like, I often describe it as bultos in a field, which means just shapes—like, bent over shapes in a field.

So, at the time, farm workers—I felt—were portrayed in just a couple of different ways. One of them was just almost as an abstraction. You know? As these people who are out here who pick our food, et cetera. Or as victims of some social injustice. Which is true; that is the case. It seemed always from a distance, right? And I felt that I had the opportunity, given the fact that I was from that community, to reframe the narrative. So, what I did was I spent a long time interviewing people, talking to them in the Coachella Valley—and also in the Cuyama Valley—getting to know their stories. And then what emerged from all those conversations was the realization that there is a lot of leadership in that community.

And so, that's what I kind of focused on: the people from the community that were farm workers themselves or are from farm worker families that have, over time, emerged as leaders in that community in a variety of different ways. And of course, photographing them very close up. The portraits are specifically about those people and their stories. Not so much about just the community in a broad sense.

Jesse Thorn: You've done a lot of work for civic institutions in Los Angeles. One of them is the police department.

Noé Montes: Mm-hmm.

Jesse Thorn: You took portraits of police officers, and you shot out of a helicopter as well. (*Laughs.*)

Noé Montes: An LAPD helicopter. Yeah.

Jesse Thorn: What did you learn from taking pictures of police officers?

Noé Montes: Well, one thing is that police officers take direction really well. *(Laughs.)* I guess it's part of the military culture, right? They do exactly what you tell them to do. And in this case, I was put in a position of power over them by their superiors, because they were called in to be part of this photo shoot. But I mean, more than that, what I learned about police officers—and what I think about, in terms of the experience of working with the LAPD—I've actually been called out for having done that. And it has become a really interesting part of my experience. It's something that I'm still thinking about and probably gonna do some work around—you know, create some work around that experience.

But at the time, I was trying to pay my bills. I had a 2-year-old, living in a little Hollywood bungalow, just figuring out how to be a photographer in the world. I had an opportunity through a friend to work for the LAPD. It is actually the LAPD Foundation, which was the fundraising arm of the LAPD. That's who I worked for at the time. I did several shoots for them over the years. So, there's much to think about.

Jesse Thorn: I would imagine that part of the challenge of doing it is, as someone who is in a position where—in your day-to-day life—you might have discomfort about the police, like a lot of people in cities do; a lot of people not in cities as well. It is a challenge to bring to bear your project to look at people squarely and honestly, when you might go into it more uncomfortable. *(Chuckles.)* You know? Like, to be able to represent them directly is, in some ways, a greater challenge when you are worried about police officers than it is when you are looking at somebody in a community like the one that you grew up in, that you recognize and see as—you know, if this person comes off well, I feel great 'cause they're being celebrated and et cetera, et cetera. Right? Like, here's a little more challenge in seeing someone as a human being who you're worried about going in.

Noé Montes: Do you mean to represent the police officers in an honest way?

(Jesse confirms.)

Well, one of the interesting aspects of that work was that it was work for hire. So, I also had the responsibility to the client, in a sense, of making them—portraying them in the way that they want. So, there's that aspect to it. Another aspect of my relationship to police is that— Well, a couple of things. One is that I've actually been stopped and held at gunpoint by police for no reason. Driving my own car, pulled over, made to get out, lie on the ground. No reason. Just like, “Why did you guys do that?”

“Oh, we had a report of a stolen car.”

“Well, this is my car.”

So, I've had that experience of abuse.

Jesse Thorn: Here, in Los Angeles?

Noé Montes: No, in Yuma—in Arizona, growing up. And also, of other police just exercising their power in ways that are unfair and abusive. But also, growing up in a home where there was a lot of violence, I had the experience of police coming to my home and putting a stop to that violence. So, I mean, it's so complex.

Jesse Thorn: Will you tell me about somebody who you took a portrait photograph of who is in the exhibition that's up right now, at the Riverside Art Museum?

Noé Montes: There is a young man in one of the photographs. His name is Castillo Estrada. And he is from the Coachella Valley. His story—I like his story specifically, because it is a story of three different generations of men in his family that have been farm workers. Castillo's grandfather—his name is Onésimo, and he came from the state of Guerrero in Mexico as a Bracero, actually—like, early in the Bracero program. Came to the United States to work in the fields. So, his son, Geronimo, got a college education and tried to work in his field. It was hard. Started coming to the US, also to work in the fields. Even though he had, like I said, a college education. That was kind of his option, in terms of like just making a living and raising a family.

So, he started coming to the US, eventually settled in the Coachella Valley after— One of the things that's interesting but also not uncommon of Geronimo's story is that he used to walk from the border, from the Mexican border to the Coachella Valley. He used to walk. It's over 100 miles. And he did this many times. It was just kind of a part of his—

Jesse Thorn: This is like a week or two of walking.

Noé Montes: —part of his journey to get to where he needed to go. That was normal for him and for others like him. But eventually, he settled in the Coachella Valley, in the town of Innndio, and raised his family. So, then Castillo, the young man who I'm talking about whose photograph is in the exhibition. He is Geronimo's son. And Castillo grew up in the Coachella Valley, got an education, went to college, studied engineering. And then after college, went back to the

Coachella Valley to live and to work there; started working in government. And now he is— I think he's a vice president of the board of the Coachella Valley Water District. He is in a position where he is able to be part of the process of making decisions about how resources are allocated to the communities of the Coachella Valley, including the farm worker community from which he came.

So, that process of progress over generations, and then these later generations looking back and helping the community that they came from is a really beautiful story and a really interesting story. But beyond that, it also is a story of the United States. Like, the work that Costello now does is to create infrastructure—it is in part to create infrastructure in the Coachella Valley that then becomes vital to the economy of the Coachella Valley, of the state of California, of the country of the United States. So, I like that story and those connections.

Jesse Thorn: Were they the family that were at the opening?

Noé Montes: In fact, they came to the opening. That's right. And that's another really gratifying aspect of this work is that you're able to take people's stories and present them, elevate them. And then to see those people in the space is really cool. It's really—you know. It's a way to honor them and it's really cool.

Jesse Thorn: I like clocked—I was standing in the room, saw everyone gathering around the picture, and it took me a minute to clock what was going on. And you know, everybody was in their Sunday best. *(Chuckles.)*

Noé Montes: Yeah. And the grandchildren were there now, right? So, Castillo's children were there. And so, yeah, we had four generations of that family at the opening. And that was amazing. Yeah.

Jesse Thorn: And you could see the pride of being so honestly represented for that family.

Noé Montes: Yeah, I think so. Thank you. Yeah.

Jesse Thorn: I almost started crying, looking at them. They were all just doing the kind of thing that you would do if everybody went to a grandchild's high school theatre production of *Rent*.

Noé Montes: It's true. *(Laughs warmly.)*

Jesse Thorn: But it was so beautiful to see everybody.

Noé Montes: Yeah. I feel very lucky to have the opportunity to do things like this, to be honest.

Jesse Thorn: We have so much more to get into! Stay with us. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

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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 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!

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

(*They break into quiet laughter.*)

(*Music.*)

Transition: Bright synth with a syncopated beat.

Jesse Thorn: It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is photographer Noé Montes. His show, *Noé Montes: Regional History*, is up now at the Riverside Art Museum in Riverside, California.

I grew up in a context where I was surrounded by Mexican and Mexican American art. My mom worked at the Mexican Museum in San Francisco as a docent for a number of years when I was a kid. Mexican museum, mostly Mexican art. And I lived in the Mission in San Francisco, where I walked past the Mission Cultural Center and LaRocca Graphics like five days a week. You know what I mean? And was surrounded by murals mostly painted by Mexican American artists. And I grew up like loving that stuff, right? Especially 'cause so many of the graphic things—it's easy to understand when you're a kid, 'cause they're about impact. You know?

Noé Montes: Yeah.

Jesse Thorn: Those are like very specific worlds of art. Chicano art, Mexican American art is a very specific world that kind of emerged from a cultural movement in the '70s-ish, '60s and '70s. Those are all things—both that Chicano art movement and the sort of more Mexican-Mexican art—are things that you've lived and worked a little bit apart from.

Noé Montes: It's true.

Jesse Thorn: Tell me what—I know that you love many of those things, but tell me what your discomfort was with those worlds and those kind of labels and categories.

Noé Montes: Wow. Um so—(*chuckling*) that's a—I feel—okay. I feel like I have to think about this carefully. Because this is a complex question, and I've only come

to learn about and appreciate Chicano art actually more recently. And I do; I have a great appreciation for it. But for a long time—it's true that it was something that I kind of felt apart from, both—I guess—circumstantially and intentionally. And my discomfort with it was that it seemed very clichéd to me, and it seemed like it was... *(Chuckles.)* A friend of mine once described Plaza Olvera, which is this place here in Los Angeles that is like an important place in terms of Mexican history in the city of Los Angeles. *(Laughs.)* He said of it once, he's like, “You know, it's that place where they dance around the hat.”

And I totally knew what he meant. You know? It was like this representation of Mexican culture and Mexican people in a way that was very centered, folkloric traditions, a celebration of the culture of Mexican culture. So, it's very complicated for me, because my experience of Mexican culture or of growing up as a Chicano or of growing up in a Mexican family in the United States was actually very troubled. Like, there was a lot of challenges—both in my own home and in my environment. Right? I mean, we were very poor, and we were moving around. Sometimes we'd live in our car. And in addition to that, the family dynamics in our home were, in essence, ruled by the fact that my dad had a severe drinking problem, and there was violence in the home, all these things.

So, I felt like there was this disconnect between the celebration of Mexican people and Mexican culture and my own experience of it. Right? And then there's also the fact that growing up in the United States, especially at the time that I grew up in—which was the late '70s, '80s, and '90s—there's a certain amount of... I guess criticism of culture, of your culture, of other cultures, that I internalized. Right? So, sometimes it would make me embarrassed. I know that sounds terrible. These are things that I could work on in therapy for the rest of my life.

(They both chuckle softly.)

But yeah, I... you know, a lot of my initial influences in terms of art and creativity weren't Chicano movement or Mexican culture art and practices. I'm finding a relationship to it that is working for me.

Jesse Thorn: The other thing that occurred to me is Chicano art in particular is often a self-conscious counter narrative, right? Like, it's about the— The Chicano experience in the United States is about asserting their own experience. You know? Not being ignored and subsumed into everything else.

Noé Montes: Yeah. And presence, yeah. Yeah.

Jesse Thorn: Yeah. And because of that and the fact that it's so often has roots in revolutionary art, it can get pretty invested in Aztlan and Aztec dancers and things

that project power. You know? Your work is so much about removing the hagiographic elements of telling the story of people. (*Chuckles.*) You know?

Noé Montes: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, it goes back to, I think, a little bit to accept things as they are, stripping images down to strictly what is necessary. And that's hard, because everything means everything nowadays, right? So, everything is a symbol or a metaphor for something else. So, you almost have to like— It's harder to make an authentic, honest image than it is to overlay some idea on it. So, yeah, I think that's part of the process.

Jesse Thorn: Like, you could dress somebody up as an Aztec warrior, borrow some symbol that has a lot of power and is really cool and conveys a really powerful message because of its symbolic associations, and choose not to.

Noé Montes: And light it in a way that is heroic and find a very specific setting that adds to the narrative, just to put all these ideas into it. Right? But I actually have a photograph of a—that I just printed for someone recently, of an Aztec dancer. But it is a photograph of this young woman dressed as an Aztec dancer, and her costume is actually not fully kosher, I guess. In the sense that it doesn't have all the correct things. It's kind of put together in a few different pieces from a couple of different types of material, et cetera. And she's dancing in a space. And behind her through the window, you can see the big sign of a strip mall. And it shows all the shops that are in that strip mall, and there's a Food 4 Less, and there's an auto insurance place, and all these things.

And I love that. I love that you're taking this symbol—that could be what you were just describing, right?—a reference to resistance and power through indigenous knowledge. Which I'm all for, by the way. But putting it in a context that is actually something—I don't know, to me, much more interesting. You know? 'Cause now the conversation is moving forward. It's not just going back. So, yeah. Again, accepting, I think, of what things are and how they are is a really good goal.

Jesse Thorn: With a retrospective solo show in a major art museum in your early 50, do you feel within yourself like you have earned a place as a professional artist?

Noé Montes: (*Beat.*) Yes, I do. At the same time, in terms of my understanding of my development as an artist, I feel like I'm just starting. And that's a good thing. (*Laughs.*)

Jesse Thorn: Noé Montes, thank you for your time. Congratulations on the exhibition, and I think you know that I admire your art making so much. And I love you so much, and I'm grateful to get to talk to you here.

Noé Montes: I am so happy that we had this conversation. Thank you so much. Thank you for having me.

Jesse Thorn: Noé Montes. As we said earlier, you can view his photography at the Riverside Art Museum in Riverside, California now through April 19th. You can also see more of his work, including some of the large-scale surveys of farm communities and just some really incredible collections of work on his website, which we will have a link to on the *Bullseye* page at MaximumFun.org.

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 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. 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, TikTok, 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 and is distributed by NPR.

(Music fades out.)