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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. Willie Colón died last month. He was 75. And I guess the short way to describe his legacy is this:

If you, a person listening to National Public Radio in 2026, happen to enjoy salsa music or if you even know what salsa music is, basically, you can thank Willie Colón.

Colón was a trombonist, a producer, a band leader, and a composer. When he was growing up in the South Bronx, his family and his neighbors would jam in the summers. Colón's neighbors were Panamanian, Cuban, African American. When White folks called the cops, a few instruments might get dented, but everybody would just come back the next day. In 1967, Colón put out his first album. He was still a teenager, but he helped take the Latin soul sound of boogaloo into the salsa age. Over a career that spanned nearly 60 years, he cut over 40 records and produced many more for superstars like Celia Cruz, Rubén Blades, and Héctor Lavoe, selling over 30,000,000 copies worldwide.

I was lucky enough to get to speak with Colón back in 2014. Here's the bit of the track that got him his first record deal. He was 17 years old. It's called “Jazzy”.

Music: “Jazzy” by Willie Colón and Héctor Lavoe—a bouncy, energetic and percussive Latin number.

Jesse Thorn: Willie Colón is one of Pan-American music's greatest legends. It's such an honor to have him on *Bullseye*. Willie, welcome to the show.

Willie Colón: Thanks, Jesse. Thanks.

Jesse Thorn: So, when you first recorded that record, what were you? Like, 16/17 years old?

Willie Colón: Well, actually when I put that band together, I was probably 14/15 years old. And we were already recording that when I was about 15. Yeah.

Jesse Thorn: Where were you playing?

Willie Colón: Well, we started out playing at the dances at school and weddings. Anytime somebody needed a band, a cheap band at a wedding, we'd get that gig. And somebody saw us at one of those weddings, and he was like a really small-time promoter. He used to throw gigs at the American Legion Hall on the weekends, and it was just full of teenagers. And we became like the house band there at American Legion Hall on the corner of 162nd Street and Prospect Avenue in the Bronx.

Jesse Thorn: What kind of music were you playing?

Willie Colón: Basically, our repertoire was like Tito Puente songs or Bon Rivera, or we even had one Herb Alpert song in our repertoire.

Jesse Thorn: Wait, what were you playing? Like, "Spanish Flea" or something?

Willie Colón: (*Laughs.*) I forget the name of it. The ones that goes (*sings a bar that stair-steps up in octave.*) I forget the name of that song.

Jesse Thorn: I'm lucky that I thought of "Spanish Flea" in the moment.

(They laugh.)

You're not gonna get the name outta me.

There were places in New York at the time where everybody was Puerto Rican, and you grew up in a neighborhood that was mixed. What was the racial mix like on the block where you grew up, and how did it affect people's lives?

Willie Colón: Well, we were mostly kind of going into the suburbs of El Barrio probably. You know, you could say these neighborhoods up in the Bronx were still heavily Irish and Italian. As a matter of fact, I have a lot of words in my vocabulary that I pronounce in kind of an Irish English, which is strange. When I grew up, I realized that the way I was pronouncing them had nothing to do with the way

they're spelled. And I don't wanna say the words, because some of them are not—but, uh...

(They laugh.)

Yeah, so it was like that. It was heavily Irish and Italian, and we were kinda like—we were like the blockbusters. We were kinda like creeping in. And we had already accumulated a pretty nice little clique, and that's why we were able to do our little jam sessions and stuff on the weekend. But it was to the chagrin of the rest of the neighborhood, who was—they were just not feeling it.

Jesse Thorn: It's *Bullseye*. My guest is Willie Colón. Let's take a listen to a record from his first LP, *El Malo*. This is the title cut.

Music: “El Malo” from the album *El Malo* by Willie Colón and Héctor Lavoe.

No hay problema en el barrio, que quién se llama "El Malo"

Si dicen que no soy yo, te doy un puño de regalo

¿Quién se llama "El Malo"? No hay ni discusión

"El Malo" de aquí soy yo, porque tengo corazón

Échate pa' allá, que tú no estás en na'

Ehh, camina, camina, camina loco

Pero que échate pa' allá, porque tú no estás en na'

Échate pa' allá, que tú no estás en na'

Que no te guilles de Watusi, que yo me guillo

Yo me guillo de Superman

Échate pa' allá, que tú no estás en na'

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: Were the other guys in the band all the same age as you?

Willie Colón: Yeah, and the average age in that group was probably... *(clicks teeth)* 15 years old, 16 years old. We had a couple of older guys. Like, when Héctor came on, he was like four years older than me. But still, there was nobody over 19.

Jesse Thorn: We're gonna take a break. We'll come back with more from salsa pioneer Willie Colón. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

Transition: Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

Jesse Thorn: Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. We're replaying my conversation with Willie Colón. He was a titan in the world of salsa music: a producer, a composer, band leader, and trombonist, born and raised in the South Bronx. Willie Colón died last month. He was 75. Let's get back into our conversation from 2014.

Tell me a little bit about when Héctor Lavoe joined the band. Because you know, four years isn't a big age difference, but it is a big difference between 16 or 17 and 20 or 21.

Willie Colón: Well, we go back to the American Legion on 162nd Street. That was on the second floor of this little building. It was a three-story building. And on the third floor was the Ponceño Social Club. Now, this was very common for Puerto Ricans. They would have a club; they would make a club dedicated to their hometown, and it would become almost like an embassy to the people of that town. So, Héctor was from Ponce, and he used to play upstairs. And sometimes we'd hear him playing up there, and it was pretty good. And we would compete, volume-wise, and everything.

(Jesse laughs.)

We became pretty competitive. So, when I finally got my recording contract with Al Santiago, and in the middle of the recording he went bankrupt—and you know, the tapes were embargoed. So, I went around shopping the record. And I got Jerry Masucci to listen to it. And he heard that song, “Jazzy”—the instrumental—and he said, “I want that.” So, he bought the album, but he didn't do the directing and the producing. Pacheco did. When Pacheco heard it, he'd seen me at the gigs around.

And he wasn't too tickled, too crazy about me—about the band. We were a bunch of kids, a kiddie band. And he came on as a producer, and he said, “You need a new singer.” And that was hard. But the worst thing was that he decided that he wanted Héctor to sing with the band.

(Jesse laughs.)

And Héctor was our enemy. *(Chuckles.)* You know? And I tell you that Héctor told me, “Okay, I'm gonna do the album with you. But I'm not gonna stay with you, 'cause you guys just suck. You know, you're—”

(They laugh.)

And I was—you know, I had to swallow that, and we went on with it. And really, I never asked him to be in the band. You know, I'd call him the next week. I said, “Hey, I got a gig. Well, do you got a gig?”

“No.”

Okay. So, he'd come and sing. And after a while, we became a team. But I never really asked him to be in the band. We were together for eight years.

Jesse Thorn: Let's listen to another song from my guest, Willie Colón. This is from his 1969 album *Cosa Nuestra*. The song is called “Juana Peña”.

Music: “Juana Peña” from the album *Cosa Nuestra* by Willie Colón and Héctor Lavoe.

Ella era una mujer

Que a muchos hombres había engañado

Pero un día vino un hombre

Que con un beso la traicionó

Y ese hombre nunca había querido

Y por ese fué que Juana Peña lloró

Y dicen que los años

Como la nieve fueron pasando;

Ella seguía llorando

Por ese amor que nunca llegó

Ay! Juana Peña ahora me lloras

Ahora me llora y no te quiero yo

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: Can you tell me a little bit about what made Héctor Lavoe's singing special?

Willie Colón: First of all, he had a great instrument. He really had a great instrument. He'd been singing since he was a little boy, so he had really good control, great pitch. His pronunciation, his projection was really excellent. And he had a great repertoire. You could name any singer. You could name any singer, and he would be able to do an imitation of them. He would do an impersonation of them. So, not only that he'd be able to imitate those singers, but he'd be able to sing in whatever style they sung. If I told him to do Carlos Gardel, he would sing to you in a tango style. He would—you mention a Mexican singer, he would imitate the singer and sing it in a Mexican ranchera or whatever it was.

So, that vast repertoire, you didn't have to explain none of that stuff to him. And he was really intelligent, and he had a great sense of humor, and you didn't wanna mess with him. If you got into an argument with Héctor, he would make a laughingstock outta you in front of everybody. But he was so funny and so quick-witted.

Jesse Thorn: Let's listen to my guest, Willie Colón, and Héctor Lavoe on the vocals in one of their all-time classics, "Ché Ché Colé".

Music: “Ché Ché Colé” from the album *Cosa Nuestra* by Willie Colón and Héctor Lavoe.

Vamos todos a bailar al estilo africano

Si no lo sabes bailar yo te enseñaré, mi hermano

A ti te gusta la bomba y te gusta el baquiné

Para que goces ahora, africano es el bembé

Ché ché colé, que bueno e'

Ché ché cofisa, muerto 'e la risa

Cofisa langa, ahí viene la malanga

Caca chilanga, viene de cataga

Adendé, adendé tú lo ve'

Ché ché colé, que bueno e'

Ché ché cofisa, muerto 'e la risa

Cofisa langa, cofisa langa

Caca chilanga, caca chilanga

Adendé, adendé tú lo ve'

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: So, Willie, that song, it had an interpolation of an African song on it, if I'm remembering the story correctly. Is that true?

Willie Colón: Yeah, that's true. Basically, it's just kind of a nursery rhyme. It's like, “Hands on your head, hands on your shoulders, hands on your knees.” And that's all it is. But we mixed it in with kind of a calypso beat, and I threw in some triangles. When I first brought it in to the guys and I told 'em I wanted to play it, they started like making faces and going, “Man, what is this?” They didn't wanna play it.

And I said, “Just do it, man.” You know? And surprisingly, (*chuckles*) that was the big hit of the album. And it was great, because this is a kind of thing that wasn't done before. So, when you do stuff like that and you're like the first ones, nobody does it better; nobody did it better. So, it just kind of opened another door for us. We started getting gigs in other places where regular salsa bands don't play.

(Music fades in briefly and then fades back out.)

Jesse Thorn: And that was a pretty bold thing to do in the early to mid-1970s. That was a new idea, to assert Latino identity so strongly across national boundaries and within the United States.

Willie Colón: Yeah, it was. And Fania and—well, Jerry Masucci. Was a great entrepreneur. And he was not shy. He would put it all out there. I guess he must have been some kind of gambler. He didn't cut the best— He was a really, uh... I don't wanna use the word. (*Chuckles.*) He was a very good businessman, and most of us didn't make great deals. I mean, I'm telling you, if I would've made the right deals, I would be owning Fania Records now.

But he did create a big buzz about the music. And a lot of people--it created a lot of work for people. And he was very savvy about what he was doing. I mean, he got us on *Rolling Stone Magazine*, and all of the Anglo press was aware of what salsa was. And it was basically his pushing us—him thrusting us into the Anglo world.

Jesse Thorn: We've got even more to get into from my conversation with the late, great Willie Colón. Keep it locked. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

Promo:

Music: Fantastical, medieval style synth.

Griffin McElroy: (*With a wise, aged affect.*) The wizards answer eight by eight.

The conclaves call to demonstrate—

Their arcane gift; their single spell.

They number 64—until!

A conflagration! 63.

And 62, they soon shall be,

As one by one, the wizards die,

‘Til one remains to reign on high!

(The music picks up tempo.)

(Returning to his normal speaking voice.) Join us for *TAZ Royale*, an Oops-All-Wizards battle royale season of *The Adventure Zone*, every other Thursday on MaximumFun.org or wherever you get your podcasts.

(Music ends.)

Transition: Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

Jesse Thorn: It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. We're replaying my conversation with the late salsa legend Willie Colón.

I wanna play a little bit of the *Fania All-Stars*—*(as an aside)* and my guest, by the way, is Willie Colón, the great salsa band leader—with Héctor Lavoe, your longtime collaborator, playing one of his signature tunes, “Mi Gente”— And this recording that we're about to play was recorded in Africa for the Ali fight that's called The Rumble in The Jungle that was shown in the movie *Soul Power* and in the movie *When We Were Kings*. It's a really amazing performance, and we will talk about it a little bit after we hear some.

Music: “Mi Gente” as performed for the album *Fania All-Stars* live event by Héctor Lavoe.

Mi gente (Ustedes)

Lo más grande de este mundo

Siempre me hacen sentir

Un orgullo profundo

Los llamé (Vengan conmigo)

No me preguntaron dónde

Orgullosos estoy de ustedes

Mi gente siempre responde

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: This is one of my favorite songs. And watching it with a stadium full of 100,000 people, and they're on a lineup with James Brown and all these other great musicians—Bill Withers, The Spinners, The Staple Singers. Now, you weren't on the stage, right?

Willie Colón: No, I wasn't. *(Chuckles.)* I chickened out and, uh...

(Jesse laughs.)

First of all, I did not wanna take all of those shots, because I'm really—I was really afraid of needles. So, I even went to the airport with my bags, and they said, “Okay, well, you take the shots when you get there.”

And I'm like, “*(Dully.)* Well, okay.”

And then what happens is the flight is delayed. And the flight is delayed, and we're waiting there, and I'm just thinking about it. And I told Jerry, “Listen, can you watch my bag for a minute?” And I caught a taxi and I went home. And when they came back, I did my part. I overdubbed it.

(They laugh.)

Jesse Thorn: Did you have to hear about it from everybody? Like, “Oh yeah, when I was hanging out with Muhammad Ali and James Brown—”

Willie Colón: Oh yeah. I wanted to die! They took the plane with them. They were all hanging out. You know, I really—*(clicks teeth)* I was really sorry I didn't make the flight.

Jesse Thorn: You had been working with Héctor Lavoe for like eight years. And it was a hugely successful partnership. And you essentially ceded the band to him and went and started a new band. Can you tell me a little bit about why you did that?

Willie Colón: Uh, well. *(Sighs.)* We were just gigging at least three/four times a week. I was married. I never saw—I barely ever saw my wife. And you know—Look, I dunno what—*(chuckling)* we got married when I was 18. Okay? And I think she was 15. It's a really great marriage, really mature marriage. But everything was not working out. You know, and that—I was really— Because of family history and whatnot, I was a really anti-drug guy. I mean, the guys used to have to hide— If I would smell pot, I would freak out. But I had already broken a couple of the rules, and I was already dabbling around.

And I had taken some my money, and I invested it in a club called El Hipocampo—The Seahorse. And we were working there. And I don't—you know, I was stoned, and we were playing. And I look, and one of the pillars had a mirror on it. And I looked into the mirror, and I just didn't like what I saw. And after the set, I told Héctor, “Look, man, I gotta take a break.” 'Cause we had been really just gigging for almost eight years straight. And I know he was kinda—he looked like, uh, I had shot him. You know, he was just shocked and he was hurt. And I said, “Look, I'm gonna stick with you. I'm not gonna play for a while.” And I gave him the music, and I said, “I'll be your producer, and you'll be the main artist. You'll do your own albums. You know, it's gonna be great.”

Jesse Thorn: Well, let's take a listen to one of Héctor Lavoe's greatest songs, “El Cantante”, produced by my guest, Willie Colón.

Music: “El Cantante” from the album *Comedia* by Héctor Lavoe.

Yo soy el cantante que hoy han venido a escuchar

Lo mejor del repertorio a ustedes voy a brindar

Y canto a la vida de risas y penas

De momentos malos y de cosas buenas

Vinieron a divertirse y pagaron en la puerta

No hay tiempo para tristeza, vamos cantante, comienza

Eh, le-le

Le-le

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: I want to ask you a Salsa 101 question. Can you explain to me and to our audience what the clave is?

Willie Colón: The clave is a two-bar phrase, so it's eight beats long. It gives the swing or the mood of the song. And the lyrics and everything have to have this kind of pulse. Now, you can start it off as a 2/3 or a 3/2. You can start it off as bop-bop, bop-bop-bop. That's it. Or you can start it off as bop-bop-bop, bop-bop, bop-bop-bop, bop-bop. It's just sung to the groove, because salsa—underneath the 4/4, there's kind of a wave. There's a 6/8 wave going on underneath it. All of these things. I don't know where it came from, but those are the rules.

Jesse Thorn: It's amazing the density that can come out of a simple 4/4 beat, plus those two little phrases, and the extent to which that density doesn't lose the pulse of the music, the way that it makes you want to move and dance.

Willie Colón: Yeah. You know, one of the keys (*cbuckling*) to this music is just it all locking in. You know? It just locks together. It's, uh— I don't know.

Jesse Thorn: Can you describe to me a time that stands out in your memory, where you were playing with a band and you had that feeling that you just described? That feeling of being locked in.

Willie Colón: When you can get—and this happens every once in a while. When you can get like a stadium full of people, and you're singing a song, and there's a quiet spot, and it's quiet in the stadium with like 40,000 people in there? That is like tremendous, because everybody's like tuned in. Usually there's a roar, but there's these moments where the people are just waiting for the next note or for the next thing you're gonna say. And there's just nothing like it. It's scary.

Music: “Bemba Colorá” as performed for the Fania All-Stars live event by Celia Cruz.

Celia Cruz: ¡Azúcar!

No me le dan un aplauso a la orquesta

Si son ustedes tan amables

Señoras y señores

Un aplauso a la orquesta

Pá mí, tú no eres ná

Tú tienes la bemba colorá

Pá mí, pá mí, pá mí, tú no eres ná

Es que tú tienes la bemba colorá

Baila tu rumba

Canta tu son

Tu guarachita

Y tu danzón, ¡ay!

Pá mí, tú no eres ná

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

Jesse Thorn: Willie Colón from 2014. Just the other day, I was literally walking down my street, and one of my neighbors—three or four houses down—was cleaning her house. She had the front door and the front windows open onto her front yard. And I could hear the absolutely freaking iconic second track of the *Fania All-Stars Live at Yankee Stadium, Volume 2*, which is the Celia Cruz’s classic “Bemba Colorá”, which is like one of the greatest songs on one of the greatest albums ever recorded. And it was right before I found out that Willie Colón passed.

Just... if you don't have those *Fania All-Stars* records, they're just as good as it gets—as are the ones that Willie Colón made with Héctor Lavoe, which are also some of the most incredible records ever made. If you wanna watch some incredible footage of the Fania All-Stars performing, there's this movie called *Soul Power*. I can't recommend it enough. You could even just find the clips of the Fania All-Stars on YouTube or whatever. But to see them all making music together, all these people from across the Americas speaking this shared language of salsa is just one of the greatest things you could ever watch with your eyes. So, thank you, Willie Colón.

That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye* is created from the homes of me and the staff of Maximum Fun, as well as at Maximum Fun headquarters in the historic Jewelry District in downtown Los Angeles, California. We've got some more hawk news this week. Our colleague, Richard, found an injured hawk in Eagle Rock and he helped rescue it. We've had multiple bird rescues on the MaxFun staff.

Our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producers are Jesus Ambrosio and Richard Robey. Our production fellow at Maximum Fun, Hannah Moroz. Our video producer is Daniel Speer. We get booking help on *Bullseye* from Mara Davis. Our interstitial music comes from our friend Dan Wally, who's also known as DJ W. You can find his music at DJWsounds.bandcamp.com. Dan and I, just the other night, went to see the great Jonah Ray's new weekly show at Scribble in Highland Park, here in Los Angeles. We had a great time together.

Our theme music was written and recorded by The Go! Team. It's called “Huddle Formation”. Thanks to The Go! Team; thank you to their label, Memphis Industries.

You can follow *Bullseye* on Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, where you'll find video from just about all our interviews—including the ones that you heard this

week. 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:

Ahora mismo yo me voy con la bamba

Bemba colorá

¡Me fui!

Celia Cruz: Muchos gracias!

(Music ends.)

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