

## THE WIRE

### Series Wrap-Up

#### Andre Royo, the Character "Bubbles"

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Introduction:

**Welcome to a special series of podcast from the Center for Emerging Media. I'm Marc Steiner.**

**On Sunday March 9<sup>th</sup>, HBO will air the series finale of the hit television drama The Wire. The show, set in Baltimore Maryland, is an in depth look at the people who live in urban American centers. The show has focused on port workers, politicians, journalists, drug dealers, drug addicts, and more, and presented these people and their struggles in all their honest complexity. The show has become known for its refusal to submit to stereotype. Even the most murderous of characters range from the horrid, to the humble, to the honorable. Some, even admirable.**

**Today we're bringing you our conversation with Andre Royo, the actor who portrayed the character Bubbles. Bubbles was one of the most beloved characters on The Wire. We watched him as he struggled with drug addiction, committing petty crimes and being a police informant in order to fund that addiction. We watched as he struggled with his opposing desires of getting clean and sober and continuing to use drugs. And in the final season, we watched as he began to live a sober life, and his battle to find out what the purpose of his life would be beyond drugs. I spoke with Andre about the experience of portraying such an intense character for so many years, about his future plans, and his thoughts about what The Wire ultimately says to all of us.**

**So I have to tell you man before I walked in the studio I was, I looked at your MySpace site.**

Uh huh.

**Before we start talking about Bubbles and the WIRE, I loved that short video you have on there, the marriage counselor piece.**

Yeah man, I got, I am living the high life in LA now. It's a lot of downtime. A lot of actors, a lot of camera men. Everybody got something to do. And I got a bunch of guys and we started this production company called The Laugh Bureau. And we want to do, throw out a couple of skits, make fun of a couple of people, have a good time, and they came up with the first concept, Cesar Milan. I had never seen the Dog Whisperer, I wasn't sure who they was talking about. And when I saw clips of him on television, I said, we got to make fun of this guy. And we put it together and it was a great time. And when I came show Bubbles outside of the Junkie role, it is a good time.

**That was beautiful, it was so funny. It actually was, a couple of things hit me. A, how funny it was,. All three of you were phenomenal. And if you watch acting or teach acting and you watch other actors work, it is the little things you do—that little business you do, the way you move your face when you didn't like what she said—it was really well done.**

Thank you man, I appreciate it. I have fun in front of the camera and with my fellow friends, they are very creative. That is what keeps me going. You try to make sure you have more fun in the craft than you do in the business. The craft part of acting is, listening and the playing, that is how it all got started for me. I try to keep that, keep the energy within me.

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#### **Do you like comedy better than serious drama?**

I cannot say I do now. I was always a fan of drama because within drama anything can be expected and anything, if done truthfully, can be funny. You never know how an actor is going to turn a line and in drama, certain things are funny. Certain things catch you, the awkward laughter. I was a fan of that, because I felt like I kept everyone, I had the element of surprise, the audience not knowing what is going to happen next. But after doing the Wire for 5 years, I am ready for some comedy. I am ready to make people laugh. It has been amazing run with the wire, and I tell people, after we finished the first episode, when we saw the test pilot, we didn't think it was going to make it at all. No one wanted to quit their day job, everyone was looking for their next paycheck. Cause we thought it was too slow, a bunch of talking heads, and the audience wouldn't sit still for that long paced drama of a cop show. And of course six years later we stand corrected and stand honored, and we are appreciative to be a part of such a project. But once it is said and done, especially for my character, I need a break man. Bubbles went through a lot, he had an incredible journey. And at the end of it all, hanging out with my daughter now and am relaxing a little bit, and for me to step in front of the camera again on something long term, I wouldn't mind a little comedy and exploring and enjoying that aspect of acting for awhile.

#### **Because it was a very heavy character you portrayed. You had some emotionally tough scenes to play as Bubbles.**

Yeah, it was strange—not strange. I had tough scenes, all the actors had their defining moments where you saw what the character was going through, and where he was going and where he was coming from. David Simon, Ed Burns, Richard Price, George Pelecanos, they know how to write novels, they are good at character breakdown, and each character having a significant arc. But sitting in Bubbles, you know, from season one, episode one, from the rehearsal and the preparation. Even preparing for bubbles, it started way back then. It is a dark character, you know, and I hung out, did a lot of research and hung out with a lot of characters who are still involved in the drug game, still addicted, and across the board and hanging with them and being with them, and understanding the depths of what brought them to that point. It is a lot to carry on. It is a lot to have in me for six years.

#### **Because no matter, how you, I mean actors sometimes can separate the actor from the character but you have to carry some of that with you, during the...**

I mean some of it, especially in television because you coming back. In a movie you do 2-3 months and then that character is done unless it is a box office smash and then you have guaranteed sequels. On television you have long hiatuses, especially on HBO. Long layovers where you are not working but you are thinking about the character and thoughts come on when you aren't working and people are talking to you and you are reminded of the character, it is with you for a little bit longer than when you do television. I mean when you do movies and for it to be my first, this is my first really big television break, so that added onto a lot more pressure where it stayed into the character. I remember first season I was truly on some, lets get this right don't get fired man! This is your big break! So I stayed into character all day on the set. It was fun in the beginning because you just, you are testing yourself and you are happy to use all the hard work you did before this role, the classes...once you got that part you stay focused and you are in the character, so. That added onto it a lot more pressure for me to stay in or stay with the essence of bubbles a lot longer than I probably needed to. And as the years progressed it was a lot easier for me not to work so hard at maintaining what bubbles was about, because after while it becomes you. You just become that world and David and them, created that world so well and all the other actors was so good that once, you know, it was easy for us to be off set and relax and then it was time, to drop back in. Baltimore is such a part of the show. We were shooting on location and in the actual spots where everything went down, and David Simon and Ed Burns would put actual Baltimore people in smaller parts within the scene, it just resonated truth and it made it easier to stay in character,

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**Now, when you researched this character—i remember it was about three years ago I suppose when you and Bob Wisdom joined us over at Woody Curry's place the station. When you were doing research for Bubbles. Talk a bit about what people like Woody Curry and other did for you.**

You know, I don't know if anyone out there knows Woody, but, for Bubbles and for me to really want to play this part and think about this character, I wanted to make sure that we just didn't see the one side of Bubbles where it was just the addiction. I looked around and talked to a lot of people who were still on drugs and off drugs and I just remember, you know, growing up in New York and the idea that even I had of people addicted to homeless was such a negative or dismissive type of attitude that you know, , playing a person like that I was, you know, I guess I was compelled to show the humanistic side and the humanity in that, and Bubbles does care. Reginald Cousins, aka Bubbles, he does care about people, he does care about making the world a better place within his own little circumference, but he has this drug problem like anyone else who may be addicted to alcohol or addicted to cigarettes. This addiction might not make everyone an evil person or a criminal. It might just mess someone up but you know their personality can somewhat maintain or hold onto a very humanistic and caring side and I wanted to—we hadn't seen that that much on television or the movies and I wanted to make sure that I stayed strong on showing the humanistic side. So when you see someone like who used to be addicted and now is recovering and working and giving back to the community, and a very smart man, and you see him hold those meetings and break it down, the physics, it reminded me that these are the type of people that can better serve in maybe helping other people get off drugs or helping people understand to help those who are on drugs because they are human beings and they are special. They are talented people, some are geniuses, some are talented in so many different ways but because we are a one dimensional type of society that once we see something about a person we tend to dismiss them.

**I am mostly curious about, what you were saying about Bubbles and the people and how you prepare. We started to set off Andre talking about you, that little video you did that is on your Myspace website, and I am listening to you speak now and the voice of Andre Royo, and remember how you spoke as Bubbles and then watching this very middle class black character that you play in your comedy sketch in your Myspace piece. The idea of the range you like to play with as an actor-it's amazing. I would like to talk a bit about you as an actor and what you did before you got on the Wire.**

Well the first thing I did, you know, I am an only child, I was a latchkey, so Mom and Dad both were working, have me the key, I came home after school, turned on television, did homework, made myself steak and sandwich and just played, by yourself watching tv, watching I love Lucy and Honeymooners and Twilight Zone. I saw television as this medium of, especially on television you would see the same actors here and there and they would be in different roles, and you would love that actor before you loved his character because you remember him on so many different things. I found out I loved the play, and I remember the first movie I saw that really showed the power of the movie world, just acting alone how to change personalities. It was Rocky, as funny as it may seem. I was younger, running around with my boys and we go to this movie theater and we see this white guy, you know, a good story, struggling to make it, a class story, and he fights Apollo Creed who was not a bad guy, just an outlandish outspoken boxer. We grew up with Ali and people that trashed talk, but at the end of the movie everyone is rooting for Rocky to win. And I am looking at my boys who would never ever root for the white guy to win! But we were like, GO ROCKY! BEAT HIS BUTT! WHOOP HIS ASS! And I was like, this is incredible, this is amazing. My mom and dad were very supportive and they always, you know, helped me entertain the idea that I could be an actor without discouraging, that the possibilities might be very very hard or the percentage might be large that I wouldn't make it. They were very supportive and I got into a theater company...so my energy was always surrounding me with people that were never discouraging and my theater company would put on little sketch comedies and we would do different sketches and it was fun to

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try and jump into characters, somewhat like SNL, and you got a whole bunch of characters and there was no wrong. And that is the good thing about theater was in theater, there was no wrong way to do anything. Once you was on that stage, the more you were committed to character the more the audience would believe you. And you felt the audience going with you or not going with you all on the power of how committed you were to that character. And those were the few key moments where I really enjoyed doing different things and going outside the box and trying different characters. As long as I can stay committed to them and be true to the character, the pay off is great. You feel other people getting it and their appreciation and it is a wonderful feeling, there is nothing like it in the world.

**Coming back to the Wire for a minute, it seems that a couple of characters in the Wire stand out for a lot of people. And Omar and Bubbles were two of them.**

Those two—and it was so strange because me and Michael K Williams, who plays Omar, we have talked about this numerous times throughout the 4-5 years, because it was such a similar story. We were both living in Brooklyn, we knew of each other. I knew him as an up and coming actor. I had just done Shaft, so in my little neighborhood I was the rising star, and I saw Michael K Williams in this film called Mugshot and he was phenomenal, and I was like, hey man you were great. And then you cut to the Wire, and the first couple of episodes, and his character came on in the fourth episode, so I hadn't met him when we shot the pilot, he wasn't around. And then all of a sudden, I saw him on set and I was like, Yo Man I remember you from Brooklyn! And David and Ed Burns told me and Michael the same thing, you know, The Wire is a cop based drama for a lack of a better word. And David Simon was sure that the cops would remain the same but the story-line would change every year. And so, for anybody on the street side of things, or political side of things, that always was subject to change. But the cops remain the same and especially where Bubbles being a police informant and Omar being the only like somewhat fictional character that David Simon and Ed Burns created, they weren't sure whether we were going to be there for all 5 seasons. They told em and Michael, 7 episodes tops because we don't know where we are going to go. And once Bubbles started talking about rehabbing, Kima Greggs said a wonderful line that kept me focused, was Bubbles builds a relationships with Kima Greggs, and at one point she said, I am going to try to be clean, and she says, what am I going to do with a clean snitch? And it really kind of put the exclamation point on, we are not friends. We are not like a family, we are just connected by the streets and you know, at the end of the day, you are my informant and that always made me worried that if I got cleaned I would be off the show or I would be killed off. There was no guarantees and the same with Omar. This Robin Hood type of character, we didn't know how long people would buy into this guy being able to whistle and walk around and rob people and not get killed. But people related and people, for some reason, like you know, with the acting and the writing they just stuck out and me and Omar, me and Michael really felt connected like...you have the cops, you have the bad guys, and then off to the corner you have me and Michael K Williams who were kind of like in parallel circumstances. The moral of the heart of the show in both unique ways that have never been shown on television.

**I think that is true and one of the things that was most powerful about the Wire was that honor and humanity crossed all those lines. It wasn't the cops who were honorable and had all the community-some did-but it was the character who portrayed it, no matter who that character was.**

Yup and I mean the one guy, during the end of this last season, we have been doing a lot of press because thanks to the audience and thanks to you guys and the writers you know, in the middle of the fourth season it clicked and people got it. And people have been writing great things about the Wire. I watched the audience as I walk around or drive around, I see the people that come up to me it has been a lot broader in terms of finding it's audience. And a lot of people are really really into this show. And I think one guy asked me, at the end of the day what do you think David Simon was trying to say? And I think in my own opinion he wasn't trying to rub noses, rub peoples faces or rub noses into everyones face about how bad it is or how ugly it is, I don't think he was trying to give, I got the answer type of attitude.

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I think he was just showing that, whether it be bad or good, right wrong, I am having a nonjudgmental ideology that people in general just want to try, at the end of the day. Try to make their little world a better place. I mean, whether it be legal or illegal, the core aspect is, I am unhappy in the way it's working right now. I want to fix it. And when you turn up your TV when the Wire is said and done, I think David would like people to go, you know what? He did it right and when I turned it off, I got off my couch, I did something. I tried to do something to make my world a better place too, to give a fuck, you know, like David Simon would write a good line, to give a fuck. You know, to try, to try and do what you gotta do, what you can do, or even what you hope to do to make your world a better place.

**Andre, it really is good to talk to you man. I appreciate you getting up early in the morning to talk to us.**

It is not a problem, like I said, my daughter is 9 years old, and I am up everyday 7am to make sure she gets a setup and gets to school on time and how things work out here...I am having a great time and I want to thank Baltimore, I want to thank you, and everyone out there who stuck with the Wire and proved to me and to themselves that we care about good television, and it is good to have that balance of some silliness and craziness and off the wallness and then certain things just to make you think.

**Man, good luck with everything that comes next and stay in touch.**

You got it man take care.

**Bye.**

Peace.

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