

THE WIRE

Series Wrap-Up

Bob Wisdom, the Character "Major Bunny Colvin"

I'm talking with Bob Wisdom, as we continue our conversations about The Wire. He was the actor who played Major 'Bunny' Colvin, the man who created Hamsterdam. So, Bob, how did you get into The Wire? How did that start?

Well, initially I went up for, when the show was first casting, I went up, I think, for Stringer and then Bunk. And, you know, I had my whole idea on Stringer and whatnot, but the great Idris Elba went on to really nail that part. So, I didn't get in when the show was first cast, and then I was doing the movie Ray, and my manager got a call, I guess from David and the casting people at HBO, and they said they wanted to offer a part in the show. And the first year I sort of didn't really get into it. You know, that's what happens to actors. If you don't get a part it's like, well, it ain't really gonna be that good. But what happened was I started watching the second season, and it blew my mind, and I loved the second season. So, when that call came through, I was like, don't, I want to be there, cause I was in the midst of watching it. Actually it was on the air at that point. So, I went in and it all worked out and I got this.. I didn't realize what that character was at that point, because it was introduced at the end of season two and there were a few scenes, but it felt so slim that I couldn't really tell what it was doing, and of course I didn't know what the next year was going to be. But, it was this guy who was just kind of looking at the way that we were managing drug busts on the streets and I was around the projects and it just seemed like more of the same, more of the same. And the character barely spoke, but when you look back at it, it framed the entire journey in the third year, so it was an amazing few scenes. And that's how it happened.

What was the origin of the idea of Hamsterdam and creating a zone in Baltimore where drugs would be pretty much legalized and how much a part did you play in a) creating that character and that whole world?

Well, I can't take any credit for creation because that's the David Simon machine. Mayor Schmoke had broached this subject, one of the few mayors to ever say it out loud, and was roundly applauded off the stage. But the idea, if you look at the idea, the idea had certain merits. How you manage it is a whole other thing, as we found out while we were in it. You're not gonna remove drugs. What we're doing with the kinds of crimes that are created around it doesn't serve the overall, and you know the whole thing that Bunny was talking about was policing, you know just good police work. We were just getting farther away from good police work, and that's something that Ed Burns knows about, as well. So, they basically took this idea that had been mentioned and in a sense experimented with in Amsterdam and other places, but on U.S. territory never, because it's just, as we found out, too politically charged. But the character, the nature of the character, I kind of took and ran in my own direction. I tried to make Bunny, he'd been on the police force 29 years. He was coming up on his retirement and that's a point where you're not taking any risk. But what he found was he could leave and just be another picture on the wall, or he could look at the situation and speak out. It's just the whole thing of truth to power. It really brought out his real mettle, the last days. He was just looking at the way policing had changed, and the way we manipulate numbers to get public support and political support and it just became a sham and he realized he was part of a sham machine, and didn't want it anymore.

And your character, that's one of the things about Ed Burns and David Simon and the characters that they created, and this whole question of speaking truth to power, but also of creating men and women who have honor and integrity, whether they are cops or whether they are drug dealers, or kids on the street or teachers, whoever they are. They are these two bodies of people, ones with little or no integrity, who sell out their lives just to get by and to get along, go along, or to get more, or those with integrity, and your character was one of those that kind of was emblematic of the integrity, and actually, like some of the others did not, survived.

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Yeah, and that's, you know, for three years we kind of, or for the first four years, it just seemed like nobody could really put their finger on where the hope was. The critics of the show used that as, you often run across people, and usually middle class, some middle class black folks who say, I can't stand that show, because we already know what the problems are. You hear that and you say, but, when you look at that show, it's so soaked in how hope is created. I mean it shows so clearly the values of the crooks and the cops, the values of the government, and how they're similar, and how out of that you have to have a phoenix of some sort. Now, it might be short-lived, but there are people who will step up, whether the community people, you often heard, whenever there was a community gathering, you heard the truth from those people's mouths. Whenever there was a church meeting, or some kind of meeting, the people who were speaking out were speaking dead on what the right thing was to do, and that's what marked the show. And then you had all of these characters circling around and figuring out what choices they're going to make. You know Bunny was weary, he was tired, and I played him in a way that just a weary guy. Like he had seen it all, but there was just going to be one moment where he was going to see something differently. And when that moment came, he responded like a young cop. And that's the character. That's when I was really proud of the character. In spite of doing something against the policy, everyone was rooting for it to work. And he got caught up in it, as well. He thought that this thing could work, and when it got out of hand and there were no funds to manage it, then it got a little, it was like a Titanic. But the fact is, if there was just a little bit of vision, a major problem could have been redirected. And that's where we have integrity and we have political will, and we saw where political will is lacking, in that year anyway.

Bob Wisdom plays Major 'Bunny' Colvin on The Wire. On this special podcast, he's with us now. One of the things you said to me when you shooting The Wire in Baltimore was that there was never anywhere that you can remember such a collection of great black actors in one place at one time working together.

We can go through television and film history and the closest you have in film was probably *Glory* that comes to mind recently. But in terms of week to week showing up and seeing three dimensional, fully fleshed out human beings, who happen to be black, played by a collection of some of the greatest actors – actors, not black actors – actors in this country, it's never happened. People watch this show and you don't even see color, you see your issues, you see your choices, and that's how great this pool is and that's what's neglected by the industry. I was reading some review about the finale last year, this year's finale actually, and the writer said it's a shame that these will be the greatest parts some of these actors will ever get, and then they'll just go back down into the firmament. And unfortunately that's true. There's not enough to absorb. I mean, every actor of color I met in this country wanted to be part of this show. It was just, it was a magnet. They said, man, I want to be on that show, because everybody saw, you were doing something way different. Now, there are great actors on E.R. There are great actors on a lot of network shows, but they're in that slot of the black character. The imagination of those writers are limited by their experience. Here, the writers had a huge body of experience and dedication to something greater, which was a city. And the over-arching character of the whole thing was Baltimore. And so, if you had somebody who was familiar with the nature of urban life, you can write, you know, that's why Dickens comes up all the time, because you just can't run out of characters. And they never ran out of colorful, strong, brilliant characters that serve the story and not a plot, and then you just go out and you can find the greatest actors to fill it. I mean, you get Isaiah who played Clay Davis, oh my god, just nailed that character all over the place, you know? Chad Coleman who made something out of Cutty, who would do that? And of course Andre Royo, amazing, amazing.

He's an amazing actor, yes, he is.

It's just all of that, and I could name check everybody down the list, and the kids in the fourth year, where you had, taking on, I mean these kids handled a charged, huge storyline, and descents, their characters made descents. It wasn't the normal do-gooder stuff that you see on most shows. These kids

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went into the depths of hell and then made their choices and we watched them do it. And because they did it with such clarity, that was an amazing season. The fourth season was an amazing season in the schools. There were a lot of kids who were playing students that I worked with and they were just as sharp and bright. It's not, it's the America that we want to see. It's an industry that I would love to have the industry see what the real potential of real writing could be and what America might be willing to accept, but again, you look at it, I might jump your next question, how many people watch this show on a weekly basis? They don't want to see black folks up there. They don't get it. It becomes, for the narrow-minded, a black show.

But the shocking thing was, though, it is, for the narrow-minded, but let's say the industry had even nominated anybody in The Wire for an Emmy, writers, producers, actors, whoever. It was amazing, not one. It blew my mind.

Yeah, and you know, it's like, you've gotta wonder, because you know these things, that's a trade show, it's like, your network can put you up and push you. I just don't get it, you know, I don't get it. I mean, even in the old days it was just tokenism. You would take one. We didn't even get tokenism played on our part (laughs). So, we're really in the backseat. Meanwhile, other shows came and went and they walked away with a slew of awards and they dealt with their story line. But I'll consistently, to this day, I'll put us, pound for pound up against anybody. The actors that I came across in that show are some of the finest in the country. But that's what we do; we're actors. And it really clarifies for the individual that it ain't about awards. It's about, this was an opportunity that probably lightning struck. I'm just very happy to be a part of it and have it go down in history as the greatest show ever on television.

Amen, and I'm sorry you're not back in Baltimore.

I know that's the thing. It becomes your home and then it's like, wait a minute, I'm not there anymore.

Alright bro, thank you so much Bob.

Hey man, thank you Marc.

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