

THE WIRE

Series Wrap-Up

Ed Burns, Writer and Producer

Welcome a special series of podcasts by the CEM. On Sunday, the HBO drama *The Wire* will air its final episode. The show, set in Baltimore, is an in depth look at the nature of American society in the 21st century. The worlds of police, drug dealers, politicians, public schools, port workers, the media. Here in Baltimore the show has some detractors, people who say that Baltimore is unfairly portrayed. But others say, the show is telling the truth of how dysfunctional this city has become. It is emblematic of the condition of America, as seen through its urban core.

The quickly approaching final episode led us to ask, what is the wire about? What does the story mean? What can it teach us about America and Baltimore? We sat down with writers, actors, producers and others to get their thoughts on the legacy of the *Wire*. First we talked with Ed Burns, co-executive producer and writer for the show. Check back for a new interview each day this week. We'll hear from the shows creator David Simon as well as the actors who portray Proposition Joe, Lester Freamon, Bubbles, and more.

The *Wire* about to come to an end, or it's ending, and I wondered if you could talk about how *The Wire* in some ways reflects your world view. I mean people talk to David Simon all the time about the nihilism of his thinking, but I am wondering about you. I mean, go ahead.

I guess the way to say this is, we went off on a tangent in the late 60's and never righted the ship. We just kept trying to put band aids on things. And what I think *The Wire* shows is the end results of all these band aids. All these efforts to try and do something, but they are so scattered that nothing is being done. For the people who are disconnected from the main society it seems that one of their alternatives is the drug world, and that create a whole culture. And what *The Wire* tries to do is show you that culture and the reasons why that culture came about. I don't think it is anything more than a dramatically fair representation of what the world is. I do not think it is nihilism so much as this is what it is. We can change it if we change the way we do things.

That one last comment, a dramatically fair way of representing where society is...so when you take parts of it such as the scenes you had in the sun papers or the scenes with the school system or Bob Wisdoms scenes when he was trying to create Hampsterdam or the scenes with McNulty where he tries to turn the police department on it's head...what does that say about where you think we are in terms of the corporate power and the power of government and people who are trying to live aright life?

I think what it suggests is, as Ronny Regan said, we fought a war on poverty and we lost, and let's forget about it, basically. And that is what part of America has done. They forgot about it, Katrina gave us an ugly glimpse of what was still there but we have managed to put that aside. That is where it is. I see the corporate world as the world of music chairs. The music starts playing, everyone starts going around, and the music stops and you plant your butt on a chair. And you are really happy that you are in that chair and you don't really pay attention to the person who didn't get a spot. And before you can think about that person, or even really think about the fact that you are in a chair, the music starts again. And now you are angling for another chair, and you are spending your whole lifer trying to get that butt into a chair. What is happening in the greater world, you cant focus on. And the fact that more and more people are going off stage and there is fewer and fewer chairs...you feel a tension the closer you are to the bottom rung of that ladder. It is all about hanging on, not changing things, hoping to hit the lottery.

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I am very curious, I have always wanted to ask you about your own sojourn to the place you have come to now. You grew up as a working class kid in Baltimore, you served in Vietnam during the war, and then went to college, became a cop, and then became a teacher.

I went to college before I went to Vietnam. And it was, that was an experience of being a college kid who was in the infantry with guys, most of the guys didn't get out of high school. Some of them couldn't read and write.

Were you drafted or did you volunteer?

I like to think I was drafted. I managed to get out in under two years, so. I spent a year in Vietnam and eight months preparing to go to Vietnam, primarily by shoveling snow at Fort Dix. Excellent training for a tropical warfare.

That's the Army. What about your own kind of, we all change a lot over life, and your own consciousness how you have changed as a man from that time as a college student, a soldier, all those years as a police officer, going into the inner city to teacher. I am very curious about the paths you took.

I guess, in Vietnam...that was a horror story in itself but one of the things that happened to me which was very fundamental to who I am, is I worked almost the whole year with a north Vietnamese soldier who came over to our side. And him and I lived, slept together in foxholes, we walked point together, we did all these things. And his fundamental humanity, his gentleness and his expertise, he kept me alive everyday, had a profound effect on me. And then when I came home I wasn't ready to go back to grad school, so the police department was a challenge. This was the era of the New Centurion, "Let's get it right." When I got into the police department I was assigned to the Western district, the world worst, and the experience I had with this North Vietnamese soldier was the one I brought into the Western. I realized I was an outsider and I had to learn the culture and learn the people and trust the people and put myself out there. And that is the thing, when you put yourself out there good things happen. I had a very blessed career, and the same thing when I went up with David to do the corner. You put yourself up there, and good things happen.

People can stereotype a person because of who they are, where they are from and what they do. So the idea that Ed Burns, 20 year veteran of the police, has this kind of analysis of society and sensitivity about the people around them-that that's not real, that that's an anomaly.

You know, in any profession you have the old bell curve. Most of the people just want to do the job and they will tend to the job, and then a group of people on one end who will actually hurt the job, use the job, and then there is another group that are enamored of the job and they make it a dedicated. And I sort of think that I am one of the people that really gets involved with something I do. I don't think I am an anomaly. The thing about human beings is, there is another animal we most closely resemble and that is the mole.

The mole?

Yeah, the mole. We love to get down in a rut and stay there and like the mole we become blind because we are not looking around. We turn off the one thing that makes us different than the mole, we turn off our brains. We just do things. And in the doing them it becomes, we have a comfort and as long as we are in that comfort zone we are happy, or maybe just content. But we, we are very reluctant to push out. So change, this whole idea we are hearing about change, change petrifies people. There are basic economic

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reasons why people don't want change. We just have to figure a way to get beyond that, begin to see that we are all in the same little boat here.

Exactly, and you on the Wire, you were a producer but also a writer. And so you created a lot of the characters. I wonder about a lot of the characters. The characters that are kind of, who seem to come out of you-maybe I am wrong-let me throw one out to you-McNulty.

Uh, McNulty is a cross between David and I as far as creating the character. I would shade him more towards David with the whole, particularly the personal life part of it. As a character, I always felt that McNulty wasn't, or didn't exhibit the police skills because they were divided up primarily Lester Freeman got them in the first season, and it became... McNulty was more of the hard charging guy, Don Quixote charging the police headquarters building. We never saw him that much on the street doing cool police work. He kind of got edged out as far as police type stuff when it was divided up character wise in the first season. I never really thought he was so much me as more a reflection of David.

So in some ways, Lester is like an intellectual cop. And that is Ed Burns at well.

Well, he does investigations the way you are supposed to do them./ One little block, and another little block, and it is building the perfect mousetrap. And that is how you catch a criminal, you follow the threads and make it work. And that is what he has learned over his years, and that is what makes him the guy you depend on when it comes to, how do we get people?

And one of the other things that strikes me, is it seems as if that the people who have the most soul, the most righteousness, really struggling with stuff inside of them to do things in a certain way that you might call the right way, always seem to get hurt or killed or swept under the rug.

Well, I don't know if they all do but certainly if you don't attend to the politics of the institution you are in, what happens is, you are going to get ground down.

Amen to that.

Yeah. That is just the nature of the beast and that...if we don't keep changing our institutions, you know, there is nothing good to be said about the cultural revolution but the idea of, every once in a while, of throwing the file cabinet out the window and starting again, has a certain degree of sense. If you look at the Catholic Church, the early church, before the money started rolling in, it was a vibrancy there. But the vibrancy gets lost as the institution matures. Our institutions have matured and we don't go about reinvigorating and, now we are up against these corporate entities who see God is power. They will just chew you up, spit you out, and keep right on going.

Ed, this has been great. Thanks so much for taking time today.

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a 360° view of the people and stories behind the issues

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Produced by Steve Elliot and Marc Steiner. Studio engineer and editor Andrew Eppig.

Through a grant from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and the Osprey Foundation.

Hosted by Marc Steiner, Executive Producer.

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David Simon, Series Creator

Welcome to a special series of podcasts by the Center for Emerging Media.

On Sunday, the Wire will air its final episodes, marking the end of five seasons of intense social and political commentary transmitted in the form of a groundbreaking tv drama, set right here in our own city, Baltimore. I sat down with the showcreator, David Simon, who also serves as a writer and producer, to hear his thoughts on what the Wire has meant to him and what he thinks The Wire says to all of us in the 21st century. Here is our conversation.

The conversation I had with Ed was really good, we were talking a lot about the philosophy behind it and it's funny, I said to him about whose characters were whose and how you work together to write things and he said that McNulty was probably more you than him.

No, I say it's more Ed than me. I do, listen, there's some of me in there and there's some of Ed in there and there's some of nobody, there's some of Dominic West. So, ultimately, I think plausible deniability requires Ed to say it's more of me and requires me to say it's more of Ed.

We were talking about how the characters in this, those that stand up against the system, those that have some sense of honor and righteousness no matter who and what they do, are the ones that seem to always get it in the end, or get hurt in the process and not be able to come out on top.

Yep.

People always criticize you, some critics will say, like what's his name, Salam wrote that piece where he said that David Simon thinks he's constructed a critique of capitalism, but ultimately he's constructed a moving brief for despair, and ultimately indifference.

Yeah, I saw that.

What'd you think?

I would quote Camus back to him, Camus said, I think in "Myth of Sisyphus," to rebel against injustice against overwhelming odds is perhaps absurd and futile but to not rebel is equally absurd and futile, but only one act has the slightest chance of resulting in any human dignity. I'm not quoting him exactly, I don't have the capacity to quote people exactly without a notepad in front of me. That, or the Kafka quote that is read to Bubbles by his AA sponsor in this season, is where I think The Wire places its humanity and I think there's a lot of people trying to tilt at windmills all through the world in various ways and I think their efforts are the only possibility for human dignity and I think that's where the Wire is actually a very affectionate, and a very sentimental.. I don't want to say sentimental, a very affectionate piece, and there is some sentiment in The Wire, it's on the human level and it is arguing for a certain degree of dignity on the part of individuals. But it is a show that is modeled on the Greek tragedies and you might as well ask me why Antigone, or Medea, or Oedipus have to go through such hell. It really is modeled on the Greek dramatic tradition, and not on sort of the Shakespearean. Given that, and given that that was our intent, of course we're writing a tragedy, and we're writing a tragedy that is, we hope, reflective of postmodern America.

Let me ask you two questions, when you talk about the role of drama and the role of a writer and how you view the world, you've just made a really interesting distinction about looking at America in the twenty first century, either through a Shakespearean lens, or a classical Greek lens. Talk a bit about that, define what you mean.

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Most of our drama is rooted in Shakespeare, it's the internal tumult of the individual, sometimes in the most Freudian of possible ways. You look at, I'm talking about some excellent drama here, I'm not trying to pick a fight, because I am an admirer of *The Sopranos*, or of *Deadwood*, for example. But the life and times of Tony Soprano, or Al Swearigan, on those other two shows, it bears more of a resemblance to a Macbeth, or a Richard III or a Hamlet. To act or not to act, you know, how do they see themselves, it's the journey into the self that propels *The Sopranos* forward dramatically. Perfectly valid, not arguing for one way over the other, but what you don't see a lot of in modern American drama, certainly not in television, is the Greek tradition, which was much more the notion of fated individuals, of people put in conflict with inexorable gods and indifferent gods, and you don't see a lot of that. And I think one of the reasons is our Western culture, particularly in the modern sense, I don't think even we give our due to Yahweh, I mean, you know, unless, you're a fundamentalist, we're not, we don't like the notion that we're not in manifest control of our lives and that we don't choose our beginnings, our middles, and our ends. It's almost a fundamental myth of capitalism, and of democracy, that the individual controls his outcome. I think a lot of what we go through in modern life is trying to argue against and defeat the randomness of modern life and of inequality and injustice, and even death. And so the idea that you are fated or doomed or that by exercising free will in the truest sense you are going to be martyred, which was the very essence of Sophocles and Euripides and all them other fellers, that really bothers us, and it doesn't have as many adherents. You see an awful lot of Shakespeare done, you see an awful lot of O'Neill done, on the stage, you see an awful lot of Ibsen. You don't see a lot of Greek, a lot of the Greek plays done, every now and then, but you know I think it really speaks to the world of *The Wire* in a way that makes *The Wire* unique and that's why we leaned hard on it, and we stole big. Cagney said, "Never steal anything small. Steal big." So, we did.

But the characters you've developed, that came out of *The Wire*, one of the things they do though, they may not control the beginning, middle, and end, and the randomness of existence, and the power of the corporate world and the capitalist world that comes at them and surrounds us all, but they are controlling their responses to it.

Absolutely, and therein lies the dignity, and therein lies the heroism, sometimes, depending on the character and depending on the moment. And therein lies the humanity and it's for that reason that our hearts break for them, and I think in one way that is an improvement upon some of the original plays we were ripping off, because the Greeks were, those playwrights, were adept at writing about man in an unforgiving world, trying to maintain dignity, but the interior psyche of the characters, I think that truly did elude them at that point, it certainly was eluding playwrights in the western canon at that point. That really was for Shakespeare to invent. In some ways, somebody writing drama today, pick from one, pick from the other, do what you want with it. It's the humanity and the wit and the humor of the characters. You know, without the humor, I mean, *The Wire* to me is one of the funniest shows about the decline of the American empire that's ever been written. And you may quote me.

We will.

I'm not going to say it's one of the funniest shows on tv, but if you're going to do one about the decline of the American empire, it's pretty damn funny. Without the humor, it's unbearable. Without the wit and the humor and the humanity, it would be unbearable.

What did you think of Barack Obama, and his love for *The Wire*, saying his favorite character was Omar?

I think it was a crass appeal for my vote.

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Did he get it?

It may have worked. I don't quite know, yet. I mean in the primary, the privacy and sanctity of the vote is sacred, and I'm going to invoke it here. But as far as the general election, McCain's going to have to come out with a very heartfelt love of Bunk to counter what Obama has offered me.

McCain and Bunk, that's interesting. I'll have to think that one through.

I don't know if the guy has it in him.

I don't know either, I'm not quite sure. But Omar, though, people loved Omar, and it's interesting that a lot of people don't get all the time this idea that Omar doesn't kill civilians.

He doesn't. He's in the game, he will kill, he is a murderer, but he has one personal distinction, which is if you're in the game, you're in the game, and if you're not.. it's what the mafia used to have, supposedly had, in its heyday. What was it, that great line from, it's wasn't Luciano, it was Frank Castell, once said to a reporter, "Relax, we only kill each other." That code doesn't originate with Omar, but he actually practiced it, I thought, quite beautifully.

And you created this character, Omar, I'd like to find out, I'm curious about the creation of this character. Here you have a black, gay, bad man from the streets. The cumulative part of this human being portrayed on the screen is, I mean, it's unique.

Credit Michael Williams with a lot of it, a lot of it. He really did bring it. It's always been said, we didn't plan the character to go along that way, and he only had seven episodes, and actually, I don't know where that came from. I know that we told Michael, of the 12 or 13 episodes of season 1, I guess it was 13, he was only signed up for 7 of them. And that's what we told him, you know, you're only going to be working 7, and we don't know if we have a pickup for season two, but if we did have season two, we expected the character to go on, but I think that you only have 7. I think I was telling him, you only have 7 of the 13, and he came to the conclusion that he had 7 and he'd better act his ass off. And he did, but you know, if the show went forward, Omar was going forward, as well, but I think he became convinced that he had some planned obsolescence in the character that he overcame, you know, not really true. We had a lot of great actors and we killed some of them, and we let some of them live, and it was totally dependent on story.

And the Omar/Bunk relationship was fascinating to me, too.

Yeah, I love that, and that I gotta credit George Pelicanos with developing in the most fundamental way. He wrote that scene on the bench between Bunk and Omar..

Oh, I thought, that should be one of the great dialogue scenes for acting students anywhere..

I thought, what he did with that scene and how he spoke to Omar's ultimate place, it grounded Omar in the original sin of his life, and of what he was doing. It made sure that you understood that any love you felt for Omar for the way he carried his business, had to be equivocal, and to have Bunk do it, and to do it on such a personal level, I thought was just brilliant. That's George, man, he brings it.

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You and George Pelicanos met where?

We met at the funeral of the lady who ran the Mystery Loves Company bookstore in Fells Point. She was a great fan of Pedro's, a great fan of George's and his work, and a big supporter of the book *Homicide* and a fan of that show. So we both knew her and when she passed, we were both at the funeral over in East Baltimore, and he gave me a lift to the Shiv'ah afterwards and we talked in the car. I said, "Listen, I got this show up and it's going to get a full run, at least one season. I'm thinking it should be more like a novel than a television show. I'd read some of George's stuff by this time, I'd been turned onto him. Laura, my wife, also a mystery writer, had been saying, you've got to read Pelicanos. I was resistant in that Baltimore way, you know. He's from Washington? He's gonna tell me about crime. No, no.. back up off me. But, I finally cracked "The Sweet Forever" that was the first book of his I read, so by the time that funeral happened and I encountered him again, I tried to recruit him the best I could and he agreed to do an episode and start working on the show.

He's an incredible writer, obviously, the stuff he came up with.

Absolutely, and the other guys, too. Lehayne and Price, it really was a murderer's row after a while.

And Zorzi.

And Zorzi, an elemental part of the writing staff, just cause of his sheer knowledge of politics and of the Maryland culture of politics. And we had Rafael when we did the port story. He was invaluable that year..

Rafael Alvarez.

..and nobody is more essential to this than Ed Burns, in terms of plotting, and Ed's influential in every part of the story, obviously, but what he did in Season 4 with his take on the school system couldn't have been done without his seven years of teaching. It really was a writing staff tailored to what we were trying to do, and I don't expect to have it that easy ever again.

I'm curious about, and I think many people would be curious about, your relationship with Ed Burns and where it began and how you two, I think in many ways, as Ed had told me, your relationship has really deeply affected one another, and the way you look at life.

I think so, I mean, I've learned a lot from Ed. Ed's one of the smartest people I know, one of the most genuine. He is an unlikely compadre for projects like *The Wire* or *The Corner*, by the resume. When I encountered him he was a police detective. Some of those guys are very, very smart, I don't mean to suggest that, but the notion of being adept at narrative, and at storytelling, and at parable, that's a lot less likely. There's a joke that inside every police officer there's a book, and that's probably where it should stay. But Ed, I met Ed when I was researching a series of articles on Little Melvin Williams. Ed was the arresting officer. It was a wiretap case, went back to '84. I met him and his partner, Harry Argerton, in the DEA offices. I had sort of a pro forma interview, it was my first interview on the project. It occurred to me that everyone was being really polite. They were being helpful, but it was very polite. The surrounding weren't helping, up in the Fallon building, and I asked Ed if I could meet him outside of work, and I'm thinking, my usual cop reporter self, some bar somewhere, I buy the beers. Except, I don't think Ed had been killing bars since his time in the Western district. There's some stories about Ed, back in the day, but I think he'd settled down. So, he asked me to meet him at the Towson library branch, so right away I knew it was really furtive, you know this is some real CIA stuff we were involved in. I got there and I met him and he was ready to check out. He had this stack of books, and I remember some of them. One of them was a series of essays by Hannah Arendt, "Finality of Evil" and all that. And then, uh, John Fowles "The Magus," Bob Woodward's "Veil" and about two or three others. And it was such an eclectic reading list that I looked at him and I said, "You're not really a cop, are you?" And he just gave this little

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weird smile and then we started talking about everything that was wrong with the police department, and the drug war, not only about the Melvin Williams case. He became, I think it's fair to say now that we're both out of it, and I can say this, I would have never said this, obviously, if either one of us was in the game, he was a great source, and a very accurate source. He had a lot of axes to grind, and he never ground one unfairly, that I could tell. And he also became, sort of a guidance counselor, in terms of my reporting. I remember when I was getting ready to do Homicide, and he was actually in the FBI doing the Boardley case, so he was not in the homicide unit then, but they were letting me in the unit, and the one thing he told me, he said, "You know, there's some good guys up there. There's some guys who aren't very much good at all, but the one guy you have to follow, the one guy you have to pay attention to, is Donald Warden."

Yes.

And I said, "What's with Donald?" Cause I don't know if you've met Donald, he's this gap-toothed polar bear guy who doesn't look like he's got as much on the ball as some of the others. Truth is, he's unbelievable as a detective. Ed said, "Don't sleep on Donald Warden. This guy is natural police." That's the first time I heard that line. And he was right, Donald was an essential part of the book. So, from a very early point in our relationship, I began to trust him. And when it came time for him to retire, I asked him if he wanted to do "The Corner," and that was sixteen years ago, so we're off and running.

You just finished this other film together as well, right, the one you did in Namibia?

Yeah, we did a seven part series on the Iraq war based on a book "Generation Kill" by Evan Wright. I think it's the best war reporting, certainly the best narrative war reporting out of Iraq, yet. I would compare it to Michael Herr's "Dispatches." I think it's that good. I don't think that's hyperbole. I wrote the scripts with Evan, and with Ed Burns, who, of course, is a Vietnam vet, and I thought brought something really special and some real special perspective to the project. Ed was actually the guy who went over to Africa for the full six months. I was there at the beginning, and at the prep, and at the end. But Ed was the guy who really shepherded that thing in, in terms of the writer-producer. We're doing it in conjunction with a British producing crew, as well, who've been wonderful to work with.

I can't wait to see the final episode of this, and kind of reflect on that. Many people have The Wire is going to end up being one of these things that's studied in colleges 20 years from now when you want to look at what urban America was like at the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st century.

Hopefully, it won't be looked upon for its nostalgia. Hopefully some stuff is gonna get better, you know?

Do you think so? How does that live within you?

Listen, I don't. I don't. Politically, I am a pessimist at this point. I don't believe we can actually even recognize our fundamental problems, much less begin to address them. And that is what the last season of The Wire was about. So, no, I don't think it's going to get better. But having said that, I live in Baltimore, and I also happen to be an America, and I'm with everyone else who's waiting around to see the game on Saturdays, and you know, trying to figure out where you can get a good meal, and you know, looking at the price of gas at the tank, and Jesus, you know, I'd love The Wire to be wrong about everything. This is not a gleeful pessimism, it's a worried pessimism. And if The Wire is wrong, nobody will be happier than me.

I guess it was about a year and a half ago, Ed Burns and I were on a panel together, down at the University of Maryland. He really pissed off a lot of people.

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Really?

Oh yeah.

Ed?

No, not Ed. How could that happen?

I am shocked.

He said that, um, he said that, "I was tired of hearing about saving one body at a time. It's all a waste of time. I don't want to be involved with anything, unless it has to do with thorough systemic change." And..

I know where he's coming from, which is, everyone's trying to play with the fine tuning knobs, in all of these institutions. As if, if they get the treble and the bass and the balance just right things'll start to work. And the back of the machine is on fire. And nobody can actually see it because everyone is actually either co-opted within the institution, or we're engaged in a political dynamic that's sort of an either/or with a limited range of choice. Ed, in addition to being a storyteller, and working on *The Wire*, and working on these other projects, Ed has spent a lot of time trying to get, like, non-profits in Baltimore, and school systems and various institutions to try some things that he believes in, you know, try some programming that he believes in. And it is, talk about a Greek tragedy, it's that fellow and the rock and the hill. So, I understand Ed's frustration.

And he hasn't given up on that either. One of the other things that really fascinates me, I think the challenges of viewer's psyche, the American psyche, watching *The Wire*, is the question of honor and humanity, and the levels on which it's found, and where it's not, and how it crosses all plains from the corner, to the police officers, whoever else you're portraying, that's something that really challenges, kind of, our notion of what honor, honesty, and humanity mean.

Right. I'm not interested in, like, labels of good and evil. Like, this guy's a drug dealer so he's evil. This guy's a cop, so he's good. Or this guy's a politician, so he's either good or evil. He's either a good guy, a reformer, or a bad guy, a guy who needs to be thrown out of office. That whole dynamic is, this probably is hyperbole but I'm going to go for it anyway, that's the pornography of American entertainment. That's every cop show and every lawyer show. Every single drama that is offered up for popular entertainment is on some level a political or cultural form of pornography, and I'm tired of it and it bores the hell out of me. That's not to say that there aren't moments where it's done so well that I want to stand up and cheer now and then. Give me Atticus Finch and Gregory Peck, and yeah, I'm in for a pound along with everybody else. But it's done so badly so often that there's nothing there anymore. It's been almost eviscerated. And, we were after something else. We were trying to look at systems, and systemic failure. We were depicting an America that has become a "can't do" country. We can't resolve. We can't get the intelligence right on Iraq. We can't figure out what these guys are doing in flight schools all over the country. We can't tell ourselves the truth about No Child Left Behind and look behind the stats. We can't tell ourselves that our police department is making up stats so a guy can be elected governor. It's like, whatever the task is, we will somehow find a way not to do it. That, to me, is America at the millennium, I'm sorry to say. I no longer believe that we are the "can do" harbinger of the world's last best hope.

When people say that, and people have argued that, and Mark Bowden did in his article, but other people have as well, that you miss a layer of the black world, you miss the beauty and

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the love that goes on inside inner city streets. Or people called the quote unquote good souls, who fight against the corner. Is that a fair critique?

Mark said a lot of things. I apparently am the angriest man in television, which, I take that as a vague manner of praise, but I think it's rather faint. The second angriest man in television, I believe, is by a kidney shaped pool with his cellphone in Bel Air somewhere, and he's screaming because he doesn't have enough points on the DVD's. I hate to tell you what the third angriest man in television is doing. He's probably asleep. There was a little bit of personal hyperbole in that piece that I didn't know quite what to do with. Mark is very good friends with a couple of editors that hold me in low regard and I hold in low regard and I've made no bones about it for about a decade. And he, I recently found out, he blurbed the book of the fabricator I had a hand in outing at The Baltimore Sun. So, there's something very loyal and personal to this thing for Mark. I sort of admire that in a way. I've gotta tell you. Loyalty is something that I do admire. But I think it colors in a sense his view of what The Wire is and isn't. The first thing is, it's fiction. And people who write fiction get to make choices. And if I decide that the premise is going to be the interior of the drug trade and the interior of the police department, and the second season is going to be the interior of unionized America at the port, and the third season is going to be the interior of the political structure, the home life, or the ordinary lives, of ordinary people who are not engaged in those endeavors are certainly going to be peripheral. That's a storytelling choice. Any story cannot be everything; it has to be something. And that's a fundamental of any form of narrative storytelling. Now, having said that, wherever we had the opportunity to depict viable working class and middle class people, be it the Colvins at home, adopting Namon, or the teachers who were working in the school system and trying to go good work, or the deacon, representing, I think, the best aspects of the black church in a place like Baltimore. Or in a variety, I could go on and give you about 12, 15, 20 different characterizations that had nothing to do with anything other than moving through their day, trying to make their lives better, and trying not to do any harm, and being regular folk. I would say that they are represented in the piece. Are they the center of the piece? Nope. Nor do I think they have to be for the piece to be valid, and so I'm not sure..

But they're essential to the piece? Don't you think?

Yeah. Oh, they are essential. I think they're essential parts of the frame in which the picture is perceived. And ultimately, I think the question becomes, what are you trying to say and what are the tools you need to say it? And one of the fundamental things we were trying to say is that the drug war is a disaster, and it needs to be ended. And that was unequivocal. If The Wire comes out of this with one fundamental and practical political message, that would be it. I'm not sure that anything other than depicting the drug war gets you there. Obviously, it's a lovely thought that you're going to also include every other aspect of African-American life in The Wire. But I don't think The Wire ever or ever intended itself to be a chronicle of African-American life in America. That is too broad a statement to be covered by any show, anywhere. I certainly wouldn't attempt that. One of the fundamental flaws that a new critic always makes, when they're not used to endeavoring in criticism, I think, is to criticize, or to critique the show that they wanted to see, rather than the show that's there. Or the book that they wanted to read rather than the one that's there, or whatever. I kind of know how to ruminate on somebody who has an interesting critique of what is on the screen. But somebody who wants to see a different story entirely, well, more power to you. Go make it. Go write it.

And, finally here, David, a non-Wire question. What are you doing now? What are you into now besides the work you're finishing? What are you reading and thinking about at the moment.

I just read Richard Price's new book "Lush Life," which is set on the Lower East Side of New York. It is a police procedural, but it's one with ghosts. It's just beautiful. It's really about America, and post 9-1-1 America in that sense, and I think it's just magnificent. I would love to get a chance to make that and I've

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been talking to Richard about that and I hope we get it together. I'm finishing a pilot on New Orleans post-Katrina about musicians, again..

Oh, I heard about this, this is a dramatic piece, right?

Right, this has nothing to do with, yeah it's a continuing series for HBO. I hope they greenlight it. It obviously is not about crime or drugs. So maybe that's an answer to the previous question. There are lots of different stories, and there's lots of reasons to tell different stories, and you'll get no argument from me. Also, I think Ed is now engaged in starting to beat out the story of Donny and Fran, you know the prototype Omar and protagonist from the corner, who found each other and have married. I think basically should be, they are the prom king and queen of Baltimore, or they should be. I love Fran to death and I love Donny. It really is a remarkable story of redemption, and it has an honest to god, earned happy ending. I don't know what we'll do with that. We'll mess it up, probably. But Ed's starting to work on that. That has sold as a film to a film company, and we're trying to write that now. So, I'm making more movies, if I can.

That's great.

Like I don't have enough, Zorzi, Bill Zorzi, and myself are working on a book about Pennsylvania Avenue and the rise of drugs in Baltimore in terms of the creation of the drug culture in American life. Pennsylvania Avenue from the 50's to the 70's. Cause a lot of those guys are dying out.

Yes they are.

And we're trying to get to the ones who are still around and get their stories and get it down on paper before it's gone.

Well, I don't think you're doing enough, David. You should do some more.

Absolutely. I'm not working hard enough.

Thanks a lot, man.

Sure, thank you. I gotta tell you this, too, and I know it didn't come up in the interview, but this is the part that I'm totally loving this year, which is everyone's paying attention to the fabricator, the fabricating reporter, because that's the overt outrage in this story, but the real critique of the media that's in this season of The Wire is that with the exception of a very good act of journalism on either end, you know, in the beginning episode, they dig the stuff out of the city council meeting. They do a good piece of adversarial journalism, and at the end, the Fletcher character writes a beautiful narrative piece about Bubbles. Between those bookends, The Baltimore Sun depicted misses every single story. You know what's going on in the world. You know they're cooking the stats. You know that No Child Left Behind third grade test scores are bullshit. You know how the Clay Davis prosecution was undercut. The viewer knows everything and they see just where the disconnect is with the eviscerated, half-gutted newspaper missing the real dynamic of the city, episode by episode. Down to not knowing who Prop Joe is, and running it as a brief. That's the total theme. And here is the great moment of meta. I am the king of meta. With the exception of one or two guys who've been watching closely, the people who are freaking out about the season are the journalists, not necessarily the tv critics, they're just watching it as tv, but the journalists are just freaking out, and, angry and petulant. They sound like a heard of cats in the alley. And not one of them is referencing that. And if you think about it, it's so beautifully meta. All across the country, newspapers that have been killed by out of town ownership, are missing, are no longer covering their city in a viable way. That's depicted, and nobody notices that it's depicted.

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But it's so obvious, it's not just, see, even in the middle, when you talk about, because most of the characters in the newsroom are honorable newsmen trying to do a job.

Absolutely, but between the economic preamble of the internet and the cutbacks and everything, and the fact that, the ambitions are so stunted and small trick, in terms of the Pulitzers and prize journalism. When you look at what they're capable of, in terms of sustained journalism, that's the depicted tragedy. And nobody will talk, it's not that they're not arguing about it, they don't even see it. Which is again, I thought the king of meta. They don't see it because they don't actually see it in the newspapers. If they did, they'd be freakin out, saying we don't cover our cities anymore. That's why people have turned away. So, I'm fascinated by the fact. I figured I'd pick an argument, and they'd argue over that depiction. They don't even notice it.

That's amazing.

It's a season about, we can't even recognize our own problems, and the institution that's supposed to recognize problems, can't even recognize it's own. They're arguing about whether the fabricator is a fair portrayal, and whether the editor's would, you know.. Yeah I know guys, that's the easy part. Look at how the newspaper connects or doesn't connect to the city. The only guy who got it was a guy Brian Lowry who writes for Variety. He used to be at the L.A. Times, and now he's at Variety, and I think it's the distance of walking away from a newspaper, and standing a few steps away. He got it instantly. Everybody else is arguing about, you know, they're arguing about character, they're arguing about this scene or that scene. Why would, you know, Zurawick is about the cameos of Olesker. He's like, you know, a little something about forest and trees, you know. They're arguing about whether or not Alma would have driven down, why didn't she just look at her first front-page byline on the website.

Those are such minor details. Actually, Dave and I talked about that on the air together.

Oh, I never heard it.

Cause I thought that everyone had missed it. He and I really did disagree about the analysis of what that was about.

Yeah, it's amazing how forest and trees this thing is. I feel like I'm the king of meta. I really do. I'm loving it. It's just beautiful. I'm really having a fun time with it. It's making me giggle.

It's good to see you giggle man, you've got to giggle sometimes.

Yeah, absolutely.

Alright, bro.

Alright, be well, man.

You too.

Talk to you anytime.

Take care, soon.

Bye bye.

You're listening to a production of the Center for Emerging Media. Our producers are Jessica Phillips and Justin Levy. We're assisted by engineer Andrew Eppig. Thanks to Clean Cuts Music and Sound Design for studio space. Visit us on the web at

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Robert Chew, the Character "Proposition Joe"

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

On Sunday March 9th, 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 going to talk to one of the more popular characters on the television show. For the last several years Baltimore native Robert Chew has portrayed the East Side drug Kingpin Proposition Joe. Prop Joe is the elder statesmen of the drug game in Baltimore, known for his smooth style and calm demeanor. Always quick with an idea or solution to a thorny problem, his even attitude has contrasted throughout the series with the brash styles of the young drug dealers Avon Barksdale and Marlo Stansfield. I sat down with Robert Chew to talk with him about his experiences portraying Proposition Joe for the last few years, and his thoughts on acting, teaching, and what *The Wire* has to teach America.

Did you grow up in Baltimore?

I was born and raised in Baltimore, MD. I moved to NYC when I was trying to do the acting thing. Jersey City actually which was ten minutes away by train...for six months. Landed one job and within a week that job was canceled. There wed rent enough funds to produce the show. Moved back to Baltimore, got three jobs waiting tables, and then New York Calls. And I went back and got five callbacks and that is how I got started as an actor. IO got my equity card and everything.

When was that?

This was 1991. And after that I toured with this company called Theater Works USA, which is the oldest children's theater company in the US. I toured with them for six years and I started getting homesick traveling every years. The work was good and the money was good but you, as you get older you want to settle. So I moved back to Baltimore, and I said okay I will just go out occasionally. But they were doing a lot of filming here. A friend of mine told me about Pat Moran casting and I mailed my head shots off. Couple of months go by and Pat gives me a call to audition for *Homicide: Life on the Streets*. And I didn't get the part but she said to me, was, you are very good, you are very raw. When something comes up I will give you a call. A year later, to the day a year later, she gave me a call and I got a part in the 7th season opener of *Homicide* and that is how it all started with me in Baltimore.

And what was your role in the 7th season?

I played Wilkie Collins who was a drug dealer, of course, an importer/exporter.

You say Of course?

Well during that period those were the roles for young black men. But it was a good role, it really was, it was a three part episode. James Earl Jones was in it.

Oh I remember that episode. Yes I do.

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And I had the wife and kid and they shot me and my wife and then the third episode my little kid was having flashbacks about his parents got killed.

Right, right, I do remember that. So, now you grew up here, where did you—the typical Baltimore question—where did you go to high school?

Patterson High School. I went to school during the time period where they were, the busing zone laws were in effect. If you lived in a certain neighborhood you had to go to that school area, because I wanted to go to Dunbar which was only six blocks down the street from where I lived, but my zone cut cross-I had to go to Patterson. I was bussed up to Patterson when they started integrating more high schools. Which was great for me because I got to learn a lot about cultures and my comedy awareness grew more. It's my first-Uh, what am I trying to say? My first taste of stereotypical jokes. I never knew what a Polack was, or you know, Greeks and Italians. I was like wow, this is...I am learning a lot! It was good for me to go to an integrated high school because that increased my awareness as an actor and a comedian.

So you said two things I really want to touch on before we jump into the Wire stuff. You said, the whole question of integrated schools, and Patterson might have been one of the only schools in town that was really was an interracial school. When I went to City in the 60's it was interracial, so it was really...when I went to Garrison Junior High before that it was a real mix of people...but that is missing and you just talked about how that kind of was a more of an invigorating atmosphere to be in.

Yeah, it was great. Some of my closest friends to this day are from Patterson High School. Because learning was fun for me, you know. When you are learning you don't believe what is on tv on the time all the time or what is on your own neighborhood because you never step outside of it. When you do you learn so much more. I think it should be mandatory all over. You have to learn every culture, every race, every everything. Have to learn it to live in this society where there is that.

You said you are a comedian. Where do you--?

Not so much a comedian but I was, I always liked to do comedies and the plays, play the funny guy, the one that would do the fall or the pie in the face or, you know, the villain with the mustache or...that was me.

Alright, so this is when you worked for Theater Works?

No, this is when I was in high school. But yeah afterwards. For Theater Works I was doing plays like Charlotte's Web where I played Wilbur the pig. I had my pink nose and a pink suit. Freedom Train, the Harriet Tubman story I played her father. Harold and the Purple Crayon, I was the porcupine. Just a lot of different stories we would go out with each year.

So how do you, surviving as an actor is no easy trick in Baltimore.

Not at all. There is not much work, even in the theater. Once again, going back to black actors...there is not a lot of black theater. Every theater in Baltimore usually will have a black show once a year or something like that you know, but the black theater—the only black theater company that I know of is the Arena players, but um...I think they need to do an overhaul on business to where they want to take the theater, because it is set in it's ways from the way it was first constructed. And we need to invite new audiences, new people, younger people especially to get into the theater. Because it is just not growing in my personal opinion even though I sometimes work there. I am not working there right now but...and this is the nighttime theater, I am part of the youth theater program. That program is always thriving.

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So you, you are talking about race and theater...there is an interesting series of articles in last Sundays; New York Times. It had to do with what is going on on Broadway now where there is this big movement towards, or debate over non-racial casting. The woman, oh why am I blocking her name, she plays the detective in one of the tv shows, she plays Lieutenant, she has a strange name, it's not like a name doesn't sound like an American name—anyway she is...

Which show is it?

I am trying to remember the name of the show—anyway it will come back to me. So, but these people are starting to move into these roles that are kind of non racial casting, for traditional plays, not just Shakespearean plays, and there is this whole argument about how that fits into theater.

You know, I am a traditionalist. Now, here is an example of non traditional and traditional casting for me. Romeo and Juliet was about the Montagues and the Capulets. Now you could take that play and do all black version, or an all white version. But to have, and even mix it, because it is a feud and there is always feuding among cultures. So Romeo could be black and Juliet could be white. But if you take, what is that, the Marlon Brando and Tennessee Williams play that Marlon Brando was in? Cat on a Hot Tin Roof!

That is on Broadway now with an all black cast.

That can work but to mix it? That would be ludicrous. Because it is about family and during that period, you didn't have a mixed family during that time era. It just wouldn't make sense.

You and me wouldn't be in the same house.

Exactly. I will meet you out in the shed later on. So yeah, that is what I mean by traditional. Some things you just can't mix because they are not meant to be mixed. They were written at a period when those were the folks and the audience which you were trying to reach was about that set of people. Now you can do another version of it, but to mix it, have an Asian actress or a black actor and white actor doing something that was written all for white actors-just doesn't work for me.

So now, you, the role you got in The Wire. Let's talk a bit about that. Prop Joe.

Wow, you know, I don't think originally they had planned to continue him but I am so glad that they did because it was just a two part gig. I came on as the East Side drug lord at the basketball game and let Omar get the connection to Avon's beeper. And then I set up the parlay with Stringer and that was supposed to be it. And then the second season they went to the docks, I said, well that was a good run for me but they brought me back to my chagrin. So I am like okay, this can go places. And then, unfortunately luck would have it, I broke my knee. And I had to have major surgery. I have a metal plate in my knee. And I think that was the time they were about to make me a regular cast member but when that happened they had to film me behind the desk in every scene in season two and even, you never see me walking in season two. I always sitting down or in a car or something. So I think that stopped my, you know what I want to say.

But you saw a lot of you in these last two seasons.

Oh yeah. But I mean I would have been, I wouldn't have been a day player I would have been one of the regular cast members. I have been a day player throughout the entire run.

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What does that mean?

Basically money. Your contract, you're privy to all the press and the travel that the regular cast members get. As a day player you are just hired on a need to use basis.

But people seem to—so your character Prop Joe, talk about what you and the writers based that on.

Well, he was, I didn't find out until later on he was actually a real person. He ran a big drug game in East Baltimore, he was a ladies man, for a long time he dealt in drugs and he was accidentally killed, just being in the wrong place at the wrong time in real life. So, but when I got the character, when I auditioned for the part I am in the audition room and all these guys are dressed with suit and ties and clean cut and, I had a sweat suit on and I am sitting there like, am I at the wrong audition? And I got the part. I think they just wanted to go in another direction because realistically I look nothing like Joe. Joe was a debonair ladies man. He was a very small man, I mean, slim. I saw a picture of him. And they just wanted to take another direction which I am so glad they did.

Yeah, you know, a lot of people are glad they did. I can think of a lot of people who were really bummed, I remember we were watching the episode where your character got offed.

Now you know that is such a surprise to me, with all the articles and I go on the Internet, I am like—wow! Farewell Joe we will miss you! And people were like, Oh no they killed Prop Joe! I had no idea and that really puzzles me, and I am so glad. I am honored that they liked Joe that much.

Because he was a character that, I mean, he was a drug dealer in a sense in the old way, the guys who first started dealing heroin on Pennsylvania Avenue in the 60's. It was a different kind of—it had a different class of men who were kind of dealing in drugs back then. It was kind of separate from the community, it didn't go after kids, it was not shooting up the streets. He represented the old style of Baltimore gang drug dealers.

The word is bond, you know. None of this violence because that would draw attention and everything is done just by a man's word. You know. And Joe tried to instill that in Marlo and in his nephew Cheese, but they are just a new breed of people coming up and Joe failed to realize that. Why he, I don't think he failed to realize I think he got tired. He said, just let me give it a try, I can do this. He got ahead of himself.

So talk about your prep for that character. I am sitting here across from you now and you have a very different demeanor in your character so talk about that.

You know people don't believe that but as an actor you sometimes take characters where you normally wouldn't go. Another interviewer said, that while you are nothing like him you don't even sound like him. I know! I am not him! By no means! Preparation...just you know what I think? I think the cast and the writing itself prepared me because I didn't do any research. The only research I did was speak to Ed Burns who is a plethora of information, this man can just pull out information at the drop of a dime. He gave me the whole outline on this man and how he is and so all the nuances like the voice I just started implementing and I felt that he would talk down low key you know. Sort of not the Marlon Brando, they tell me my son Michael...not that far but he just would keep it low too, you know, smooth talker, low, you listen to someone with a low voice. Somebody yells you usually tune them out. So, I said, that will be Joe and he will be laid back.

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He had a sense of power. It wasn't just your physical weight but that added to it. It was also the character was grounded, he was there.

He didn't react and jump when something bad happened. He always wanted things calm so he could think. And fast with an idea. You really have to watch because he would come up with something really fast and he wouldn't

So you miss Prop Joe?

Yeah, I do. I do. Especially the final season because the writing really kicked, I mean I loved the stuff they were doing in the fifth season, I really do. And just working with the kids previous to that in the fourth season, that was a lot of fun. That was a lot of fun. So we were moving.

What do you think about the, were you there for opening night? You were there at the premiere. And there was a demonstration outside, some folks from the black community who are upset about the portrayal...what did you think of that?

That was surprising to me and I tend to forget. Everyone has different opinions but when we came out of the theater, I stood there like are these people insane? What do they mean we are portrayed inappropriately and stereotyped? It is the total opposite. Those are real people. You see this in the streets everyday and the people who were picketing looked like they saw this in the streets everyday if I can get right to the point of it. They looked like someone said, hey you want 50 bucks? Come protest outside this theater. I mean, it was just, I think it was put on by somebody who just had a gripe against the show. Propped up by one individual, because, the bulk of this city loves that show. Black, white, anybody. Its just a great show. I think politically it might rub some noses the wrong way because they are telling the truth about a lot of things but it is just a very realistic, inspiring point of truth. And it is only a small portion of Baltimore that is like this. I mean we have parts of Baltimore that are wonderful-beautiful neighborhoods, the Inner Harbor is growing, the downtown area is being refurbished, Hopkins rebuilding everything. I mean Baltimore is a growing major city. And there are just some parts that are really poor and drug infested and The Wire portrayed that.

So, what do feel about what the Wire politically is trying to say about where America is? We talked a lot to David and to Ed and to Clarke Peters and others about just the kind of philosophy behind the Wire. And how, have you watched the show, do you watch it?

I watch it only after the run has gone on, on the television, and then I sit and watch the whole thing in one seating. So I haven't seen any of the fifth season yet except for the first one, I went to the premiere. I haven't even see my death yet, so I don't know how it turns out.

So, now why do you do that?

Because I like to do it all in one sitting, back to back. I don't like to wait for the next episode. It, I like to view it as a long miniseries.

Do you feel that it is as much of an epic as some people are making it out to be, that it is this kind of look at the state of urban America at the turn of the 21st century that will be looked at for a long time to come as a piece kind of to study what our world was like at this point?

Yea, I do. And I think, I think the difference is, because you have seen, we have seen different movies that portrayed, you know, downtrodden people on drugs and welfare and all this kind of stuff. But I think with David and Ed is that, it's no falsehoods and it is all pure truth. You have some of the greatest actors on this show, definitely the best writing, and the way it is filmed is so realistic that it touches people in a

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different manner. It is not the Hollywood, Hollywood sized version that you say, Those are bad people we always see that. When you look at The Wire it is all done from a fresh point of view, like, I never knew this, but you watch it all the time but it has always been Hollywoodized, if that is a word I can use. But with this it is like right in your face.

Yea, I love the way they set up your character in his little shop.

I love that. Here is this man who is a drug lord with all this money coming in on a daily basis and he is fixing old clocks and watches and VCRs. Wears the simplest of clothes. A big Hawaiian shirt, pair of nice slacks and some tennis shoes and he is good. Only a watch, no ring no bling, none of that. That's Joe.

That was the old ways. So, what do you do now? The Wire is gone.

Yeah well unfortunately with the writers strike just being over two weeks ago, you know, it is the season now where everything would have been done and filmed so filming and auditioning season, it really doesn't start until September sometimes. But there is still a lot of movies that are being made right now so I have auditioned for about four movies so far.

Locally, or outside of Baltimore?

Outside of Baltimore. Two in New York and one via the Internet for California, because you can film yourself—they sent you the sites email, you read the script, film yourself and send them a version instead of them flying you over.

So what kind of roles are you getting, auditioning for?

Well, funny enough the first one I got for was for a serial killer. I was like, what a stretch! But he was working in cahoots with a doctor who was the one actually killing the women, I was raping them and bringing them to him. And then he would cut them up. I thought that would be great—I thought it was great, two villains for the price of one. The next one was just a landlord, and it was an alternate world where everything, you couldn't tell a lie. Whatever was on your mind, you had to speak. And I am evicting this guy, and he is like, But I don't have the rent. I know, that's why I'm here. You just say what is on your mind. Another one was for a bouncer in a voodoo shop, a psychic voodoo lady that tells your future. I was the bouncer, Pookie. And the other one I don't even remember.

Are you still teaching?

Not right now. The Arena Players Youth Theater, well the whole building is under reconstruction and what happened was they got a 100,000k grant from the city or state but to our chagrin it is a matching grant. They have to match the same amount before anything is implemented. So unfortunately, half the staff was laid off until they do the reconstruction for the heating and the air conditioning system. And we didn't have a large enrollment this season, so it is downsized pretty small. So, not until the end of March or June will I be going back with my kids.

So now, I have a lot of friends who are actors who live in this town and I know how tough it is to live as an actor, so how does one survive?

Out of town it is almost impossible, you just have to get another job. Waiting tables, clerk here and there, you know...the mail post office, secretary work, computer...you have to get a 9-5. That is the only way.

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And, this is how you survive when you aren't working?

Actually ever since I became an actor, whenever I would work or tour I'd save money. So I would live off the money I save and while I am looking for something else. I have never been one, ever since I was a kid I said, I am always going to have money. So even when The Wire was over I had saved up all my earnings from the previous year. And I keep going with that until the next thing comes along.

That's great, well your character, I think you, you say you were shocked but you created in your own way a little cult figure in Prop Joe.

Which still is shocking to me believe it or not. Very much so. I heard Chris Rock just did stand up here in Baltimore at the Lyric, and his opening monologue was, "They killed Proposition Joe. Why they go and kill Proposition Joe? How come they ain't kill Marlo?" I am like, are you serious? They say, yeah! Half my friends were telling me this. I am like, man! Chris Rock is talking about Prop Joe!

You should feel good about it, you created a character that, it said a lot to a lot of people.

Yeah I am really proud of that. I am proud of the whole organization, The Wire, from the Wire family. From the writers on down to the craft table people. It was nothing but fun and a privilege to work on that set.

So, do you have a scene or part of your character that has meant more to you than others, that stays with you?

You know, I don't know. Every moment with Prop was always a privilege for me. One of my, one that stands out was when Marlo came in the shop with the clock and he puts the gun to my face and we didn't even rehearse it, we just said, okay...well, the first take was just like, the first, they did one rehearsal and they said, okay let's film it. It was just automatic, it was like, I am living this right now with a gun being pointed in my face because that has happened to me in real life twice when I was a younger, much younger man. So, that stays with me because I drew upon that. You know, a gun being pointed at my head and it was like, okay I am just going to be calm, I am not going to look, I am not thinking about death, and that is the thing that stays with me about Omar, I said Marlo, I meant Omar.

Omar...he was an interesting character.

Very much so. A great guy to work with too. He was actually the first person I met on the set. My very first day of filming, I was doing the basketball scene with Avon and Stringer and the next scene was with Omar in the shop trying to get the number, WeeBey's phone number.

So we were talking about a bunch of things a minute ago, but one of the things you were commenting on was the fact that there were no Emmy's which always shocked so many of us.

Yeah. Why we didn't receive, and not so much as winning Emmy's, but Emmy nominations...with the critically acclaimed writers and even critically acclaimed writers who said that the Wire was like the best television show. And especially the fourth season with the whole thing about the kids. And, I was the drama coach with the four young men on the show.

You were the drama coach! Where did that come from?

Because I worked with the Arena Players youth theater program and Pat Moran called me one summer and said, hey we are doing the school system for the fourth season of The Wire and I understand you have some kids, I need you to send me some kids. So I prepared-she sent me some slides and I prepared

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about 8 of my boys. And sent them to her, and when they came back she called me and said, Robert, I don't know what it is but I think every last one of those boys was good. She says, what are you doing with those kids down there? I said, this is our program. She said, every one of them was so well prepared as actors and all of them were good. We wound up with two of them having majors roles, well the four guys were not from my youth theater program but the young man who played Sherrod, Bubbles side kick, the junkie, he is from the youth theater program. The girl in the first episode of the school system that cut the girl on the face, Sharmain, she is one of my students. And then you had Rikayah who was always in the classroom scenes, she gets up and yells at somebody, and she busts through the door, she is one of our students. And about 22 other students of mine had parts in this. Especially Justin Berly and Melvin Russell. They were part of Marlo's crew. The one came up to the car where Burrell was in it, and said, you want the five? And he puts his police hat on and the kid still doesn't realize it is a cop and then he backs away from the car. That's Justin and Melvin. Actually Melvin was the first one we sent down because they were trying to cast the part of Marlo and they loved Melvin but he was too young, so they said, we will keep him on because he is so good. 22 of my kids got small parts here and there on the show.

That's amazing. So is that your real passion, teaching acting?

That is my second real passion. When I am not working, I teach. You know, I love to inspire young people and bring out what they already have. I never liked to put what I do on them, always bring out what they have. So let me see what you have, and I will ask them questions to make them think about what they are doing instead of showing them. Because when you show someone something they will do it the way you do it. Which is the way you should teach people but not in theater, I don't think. I think you should allow the actor to become unique.

So where did you study acting?

I didn't study-study. You know, during my period, well the black and white tv's...you know you had all these great fantasy shows like I Dream of Jeannie, Bewitched, Gilligan's Island, Star Trek...I always wanted to be on Captain Kirks team with the phaser and exploring new worlds. So I emulated a lot of those B television shows. I was a little ham in High School as an actor, and the day I learned-I remember the day I learned to act. I was standing in my doorway at my Moms home. I was 14. And one of my nephews had passed away, and we just came from the funeral. I am standing there in the doorway and I am just crying. And I am like, Oh! This is how you act. Because I would always, I was really a bad actor as a kid, I was such a ham. And the tears was so real, and I was like, Oh this is how it should be when I am acting. I retained that moment thinking about him passing and whenever I started to act I was like I have to do real stuff like it really happened. And that is, training, who needs training? I know what it means to act. That is how it all came to me, it's that strange. Those were my acting teachers.

Life.

Life, exactly.

That's great. Can I ask a personal question? How old are you?

(Laughs) You know I read an article where it said, Prop Jowe is guessed to be about 55ish or so. I'm like, oh my god they took me up about 15 years.

I didn't think you were that old!

You know actors hate to give their age because then people will hear and say, we can't cast him because he is too old...

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I am good friends with a couple of guys in the cast, one of my best friends is Bob Wisdom who plays...And he is an old friend, we acted together in theater and have been friends ever since. And, if you look on his website, it says born 19???

I will just say I am in my younger 40's. And that is where I am. Which is not bad. If I lost the weight I could look 30 sometimes.

But your character, Prop Joe...

Yeah I think Prop Joe is about 50 something.

Yeah his character seemed older. He wasn't, you know...he seemed like a much wiser and settled man. He was not the same as...

Definitely. And that is how I portrayed him, so maybe that is why people think I am that age. Full of Wisdom, old Prop.

So what are the kids doing now, the ones you were teaching that were in the Wire.

Well the four young stars, they are busy as all outdoors. I mean, they have been appearing on Cold Case, Law and Order, Akeelah and the Bee. Jermaine has been opening for a lot of hop hop and R&B artists and speaking at a lot of occasions. They are filming all over the place. They have a lot of work coming up.

That is good. They are from DC or here?

Two of them are from New York, one is from Boston, and one is right here from Maryland. Jermaine, the one who played Dukie, he is from here, he is from Maryland. But Maestro that played Randy, he is from Chicago. And Tristan and Julito who played Michael and can't think of his characters name, they are both from New York. Brooklyn and Staten Island.

Do you stay in touch with them?

No, the last I heard from them was at the reunion after the premiere. No I don't stay in touch, they are too busy. We have email addresses but we don't usually communicate unless they have something coming up and they will email me and say, I am in this or I am in that. That is the same with the others, we don't stay in touch because everyone is so busy. I stay in contact with a couple of people. One of the actors, fat faced rick, he had a small recurring role on this show because we do a lot of auditions together because we are in the same typing cast. Big men, elderly men, so we go out for the same parts. And Snoop, Felicia, she lives in my neighborhood, but she is busy too, she is promoting her book.

Yeah I interviewed her for her book.

Arm? Who is in DC, I think he is extremely busy. I think he is making a movie in Pennsylvania right now with Angie Stone. So they are keeping pretty busy! Me, I am getting in there but like I said, with the writers strike being over I am just auditioning a lot.

That is great. Robert Chew this has been great. I appreciate you taking the time and coming in today.

Thank you for inviting me.

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I am looking forward to what you do next.

Me too. You might not recognize because I don't have the Prop Joe voice. It was just a voice—sorry folks.

But it was a good one!

Thank you.

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A Visit to Viva House Soup Kitchen

Welcome to a special series of podcasts from the Center for Emerging Media.

I'm Marc Steiner.

As the final episode of the hit HBO series THE WIRE approaches, I'm sitting down with writers, actors, directors and others who have been involved in the production of the show since it premiered in 2002. I'm asking them to share their experiences and to talk about what they think the wire is all about. What lessons they think the wire has to teach us about America.

One of the greatest things about The Wire is how real it is, and how it almost slavishly weaves truth into the fiction. Some of these are things only people familiar with Baltimore are able to pick up on. Like when a former governor makes a cameo, or just how much the fictional mayor Carcetti resembles the real mayor Martin O'Malley. But there are some things that even people familiar with Baltimore don't pick up on.

In this scene, a newly sober Bubbles visits a local soup kitchen to find out if he can volunteer.

<clip from the wire>

That man with the Bronx accent is Brenden Walsh. He and his wife, Willa Bickam, run a soup kitchen called Viva House. It is part of the Catholic Worker movement. They run it out of their own home, and have been doing so for decades. It's not a normal looking soup kitchen. It isn't depressing, or institutional. It's actually kind of beautiful. Artwork covers the walls, which are painted warm and inviting colors. A gleaming piano sits against a wall.

BRENDEN: The wire did come one time for other seasons, and they looked and it and decided not to do it here. To small or whatever. It didn't look like a soup kitchen. We told them, that was the point. We don't want it to look like a soup kitchen. We want it to look like a house, because that is what it is. So we ask people when people come in, like we'll try and sit whole families together or people who want to sit with someone. So we have it broken into smaller spaces. And we have music and flowers. So we try and make it as family like a we can.

WILLA: Mill Fleur Florists in Roland park gives us flowers every Tuesday. Gorgeous. I mean last week we had more roses than we could give away. And then we give them away at the end of the meal, at the end of the week.

BRENDEN: On Thursday when we aren't doing it, we ask, who is having a hard time at home? And then they get a whole bunch of flowers.

A soup kitchen that gives out beautiful flowers along with food. Who has ever heard of such a thing? It's clear that Brendan and Willa care about the people they serve. Along the artwork and quilts hanging on the wall are pictures of they visitors they get.

WILLA: Jessica you might enjoy, here are some of the people who come into the soup kitchen. These are people making the plates. We have about a 100 volunteers who make plates. And people come to eat, and this is our stone of hope.

BRENDAN: Oh yeah, see originally we were going to make it a tombstone, and then we said, that is too depressing. This was the year of the 300+ murders. So rather than have it so depressing we made it a stone of hope. So on the stone is says, we will yew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. And this mural says the world will be saved by beauty.

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It's clear that Brendan and Willa are doing much more here than running a soup kitchen. Yes, they provide food, but....

BRENDAN: But the main thing we do is provide a sense of community. So when you come we do as best we can to make this as nonviolent a place you can come as possible, and try to make it as best we can completely different from the violence of Baltimore city. And so, it's the way we envision the way the society could be...where people could treat one another as real people.

Brenden and Willa have been feeding their neighbors out of their house since the 1960's.

WILLA: see we started this before there was soup kitchens. We never wanted to do this. It took us 25 years to put a sign on the door. We just wanted to be neighbors and invite our neighbors here and had neighbors staying with us. And the housing department gave us a hard time what it was was the neighbors complain because we had black and white people living together. That would be 67, 68, 69. this was a white area, black people lived on the other side of Baltimore street so it was very racially divided, as it still is. We chose to live here because it is on the boundary line. It is a perfect place to be. We chose to be here because it was the poorest white community in the city. We moved here shortly after the assassination of MLK and we knew we better be in a community that was a little integrated.

In the 40 years since they have moved to West Baltimore, Brendan and Willa have only seen things get worse.

WILLA: just 40 years ago is not long ago. There was treatment on demand. So for example the guys who lived with us or came to the soup kitchen they could check themselves into spring grove. When they hit bottom they could go check in. Nowadays, it is years. There was a woman in the kitchen a friend, who was here to eat. And she was so thrilled, she got into a treatment program. She got into a program, and she was flowing about it. And the people in the kitchen didn't pick up—one day inpatient, and 7 days outpatient. Now that is not going to work. What we are doing?

BRENDEN: the idea of the common good is gone. The more and more we privatize, deregulate..the harder and harder it is. Even tearing down public housing makes it harder to organize. And this isn't to say keep the high rises but it does mean that when these people got thrown out and scattered there was no one there to help pick up. What has happened in this neighborhood is that people double up, and all these vacant houses doesn't mean that people don't live there. They have started cementing them up but people still get in.

Brenden and Willa have watched as vacant homes in their community increase. The population has plummeted. What happened?

BRENDEN: In Baltimore we have lost over 150k blue collar jobs since I have been here. And we have lost since 1950 a third of the population. So you only get work here that you can support your family on if you have a college degree and you are in tourism, finance or medicine. See this neighborhood used to have Maryland cup, Montgomery wards, coppers was here. A lot of light factory work. It was a big difference. Now we have over 50% unemployed around here and we don't see anything that is going to change in regards to education or employment and that is a hard thing to say.

Brenden says that the reason that he appreciates the wire is that in all of it's five seasons, it has dealt with these issues. And that is why when they were asked to be a part of season five, they agreed...though maybe they didn't know quite what they had signed up for.

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BRENDEN: we really had a good time. It was a lot of work. Bubbles only scrubbed one pot. They told us to make it look like a big job. And we did, like dummies. And then after he finished the pot, everyone left! And so the next time we had to have pots, we just had one dirty pot.

There were some instances where Willa and Brenden were forced to depart from reality. Here's a scene where Willa tells a young mother to stop hitting her baby

<clip from wire>

WILLA: I do not like that scene, they knew it. So the scene that happened before is that I am usually working in the kitchen and so I can see what is going on. And in this scene in the wire, which has happened before, there is a woman sitting at this table and she is high, she is known to us, she is an addict, and she is berating her child for eating off her plate and slaps him. And at that point I come in from the kitchen and ask her what is going on, can I help you. However in the script....i wasn't allowed to sit down, I did I tried to change it. And I sat down to talk to the mother like any of us would do. You always maintain eye contact, you don't stand above someone. So I sat down. CUT. What are you doing? See this tape, stand there. But id rather sit! Didn't go over too well. We did this late at night. It started early and then they have twins of course, the 18 month old child was put back and forth during this. But by the time they did this scene both twins were screaming, the mother was in the kitchen crying. I did my best to humanize the scene but it comes off as I was very hard on her. Now I will always be hard on someone who hits her child and calls them these names for eating off her plate, but I wouldn't do it in that manner. It is a very hard woman who portrays this scene but that is not characteristic of me.

BRENDAN: once the line is written, you have to say that. In the scene I was doing with Andre, bubbles, I was telling him that we really needed helping working the tables in the back. But the line was, waiting the tables. So I was, this is a catholic worker house, so we would say working. I kept screwing it up, and Andre said, say it the way it is written or we will never get out of here!

WILLA: He said it a little more profane!

You did have to say the lines they way they are written! Not a lot of Ad libbing

WILLA: at the end of the scene, you had this baby, she was a mess. So what would you do but put your hand on his shoulder to try and comfort him. Cut! What are you doing? Don't touch the child.

BRENDAN: when a fight breaks out you have to get yourself in the middle of the two people. You cant grab people. Willa was trying to sit down so she could see the mother eye to eye and say, can I help you? Can I hold your baby while you eat?

WILLA: Standing between someone is the Gandhian principle of interposition and so they try to anticipate. We have worked all our lives for a world of nonviolence so you anticipate what might happen. As she raised her voice I would have anticipated there would be trouble.

BRENDAN: So it wasn't realistic that Willa would do that. If you did that, the woman would have gotten ticked and maybe belted you.

WILLA: Her line was, the last line to me was to be delivered with " a good eyefuck" as it was written in the script by David Simon. That is his favorite word he said. (laughs)

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In the end, Willa and Brendan believe in THE WIRE because the WIRE stands for the same thing they do: for the losers of the world and the important of their struggle.

There is a great article in IN THESE TIMES on the Wire. And the guy pointed out that what he liked best about was the stories of people who are struggling. Whether or not they are struggling for good or the bad, they are all in a struggle. And then he says, but most of us lose, all throughout our lives. And here is the quote. The only kinds of fights worth having are the fights you are going to lose. Because somebody has to fight them and lose and lose and lose until some day, somebody who believes as you do wins. In order for someone to win an important major fight one hundred years hence, a lots of other people have to be willing, for the sheer fun and joy of it, knowing they are going to lose. You mustn't feel like a martyr, you have got to enjoy it.

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Produced by Jessica Phillips and Justin Levy.

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Studio space generously provided by Clean Cuts Music and Sound Design.

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Clarke Peters, "Detective Lester Freamon"

You've kind of fallen in love with this city haven't you?

It's because it's got so much potential, you know, and it's got history, and it's got culture, you know, and there's a dark side. When I say dark I don't mean dark in a negative sense but dark as in the shadows of culture that is just not being hit, you know. The artists, the artist community around here, the painters, I'm blown away with it. My friend Larry Scott who passed away this year. That's Larry's, I got a bunch of his stuff around here, as well. It feels like how I imagine my father's experience of Greenwich Village was, back in the 50's, you know, where there was poetry, and there was jazz, and there was art. You know, I think that Baltimore has got that. But I think it's in the shadows.

In the shadows.

Yeah, it's just not uh.. it needs to come on out even more. When Reg E. was here, he was playing his bari, up on the balcony one day, and he's going over the same thing over, and over and over again. And then one day I'm sitting in here and I hear two horns and there's someone across the alley with a trumpet, answering him. I'm sitting here and I'm thinking, this is..

I love that.

This is it, man. This is it. Oh, shoot. You don't get stuff like that anywhere else. It's just manageable enough as a city to have those kinds of moments, and just with a really nice atmosphere. Yeah, I dig it. I dig it.

You know, Bob Wisdom said to me once, about the stuff on The Wire. I want to come back to what you're saying, but I want to come back this way. Bob once said to me that one of the things about The Wire that blew him away was, there's never been a place in tv/film in America where so much black talent gathered in one place at one time.

Yeah, yeah, that's very true, and subsequently made all of us, and particularly the story lines, made us all feel like actors on a mission, telling a story that needed to be told and, although, that first season you see a lot of black faces, that second season the subject matter moved to the docks and to a white neighborhood. And David was right when he said The Wire is the story of a city. It's not just about the Barksdales or about Avon, you know, it's about all the stuff that happens here and bringing all this talent together was wonderful. More of that please, more of that. Because of that, we could have discussions like that here and have dinners around where.. we don't, it's seems like as a community of black actors, we don't get a lot of time to exercise our intellect. You're always chasing either the gig or whatever. So, it was enriching having brothers and sisters here talking, you know. It was history, it was politics, it wasn't all about, oh I'm tired of white dudes kicking my ass, and this and that. It wasn't all that, you know, and it was like you know, somebody's say like, Hamsterdam, well that's a damn good idea. You could see how that would work in a city like this, and probably only in a city like this because it's small enough and it's manageable enough to monitor something like that. You couldn't do it in, like, New York. I don't think you could do it in Philadelphia because the cities are so big and sprawling like that. You know, for like here, having all that black talent wasn't just about the talent. It was also about all those minds coming together from these different walks of life. Some from the Caribbean, some mixed, some Native American ties, some African ties. Some with high school educations, some with college degrees, but everybody mixing and rapping. It was a beautiful thing. More of that.

Who lived here in the beginning?

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I got this from a Johns Hopkins lacrosse, male's lacrosse team, they were here. When I got it in there was the American flag, Bud Light things all over, naked women, it was like a frat house, you know, and the helmets out on the back and the paintball shots where they were shooting the rats in the back. It was all good. It was good.

But you said there was a bunch of actors came and lived here in the beginning with you, in this house.

Actually, it was John Doman, Reg E. Cathey, and Pryzbylewski, Jim True-Frost, so the four of us were here. Last year it was again Reg E., Neil, and Karen Thorson, one of our producers, who was here. There would have been a lot more had I been here to manage it even better, but I'm an actor. I'm not that much of a landlord and if you want to come and hang, I'm up for that. It'll cost you this much. Help out with the food and the heat and you're cool.

Well, that's good, though.

Yeah, yeah. Well, that's made me think, if I had next door, damn I could really turn this into a nice thing. You know, a really nice vibe.

You just have to move those people out, right?

Well, you know, he's a really nice kid, Skizz, he's from Sri Lanka and he's a hip-hop producer, and his mother is a teacher, I think someplace in Annapolis.

That's funny; that's wild. The little corners we don't know about in this town.

That's what I dig about Baltimore.

Yeah, there's all kinds of stories here.

Yeah, that's right.

And that's part of what we've been talking about doing, our next, the next step. David and Ed were saying to me that the actors had a lot to do with who their characters were, what they did to kind of bring them to the fore. And both David and Ed focused a lot on your character. They thought about your character as being emblematic about what was right about the police, and what was.

Yes.

In some senses it was kind of the vision of Ed Burns.

Mm hmm, I asked Ed who...everybody seemed to have a character to go to, to study. Bunk does exist and so Wendell could hang out with Bunk. McNulty could hang out with anybody, you know. So, I asked Ed one day, cause I was really feeling on the outside. I think this was the second season. Who is Freamon based on? And, Ed's face dropped. He said, "I thought he's sort of based on me."

That's what I thought.

I thought, that works for me, Ed, cause, a lot of love to this brother. A lot of respect to this man and what he's done with his life and respect for the path that he's trying to walk in this jungle of deceit, and to try to keep it straight. And I think that when people level a negative accusation at The Wire, I think that they're not looking at characters like Freamon who are trying to do the right thing. Or like any of them,

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who are not corrupt cops, but trying to maintain some virtue in this forest of thorns where it's really difficult to negotiate through. And with Freamon's story being sideline for 13 years and 4 months and whatever, for trying to do the right thing. Those are the characters that I think we need to look at more than the Omars, and sayin, oh, it's really a bad light on our city. You don't just look at the negative side. Look at the people who are trying to do it, and look at their faces. Not every black person on this show is a bad guy.

The night of the Baltimore premier, you were there, and there was a demonstration outside, with some really angry black folks saying..

Sayin', what was they saying, black actors, don't sell your souls to these white storytellers, or whatever. And my response to them, was write the stories brother. Write the stories. If there's a black cat writing a story, I'll do it. It has nothing to do with, in their minds, selling out. The blessing of David is that regardless of what clothes that soul is wrapped in, the stories that that man is telling are stories that just need to be gotten out there. He's not doing it cause he's a white dude that's trying to do this for.. no, the story just needs to be told.

I'm really curious about your thoughts about that. I was gonna ask Bob the same thing, and Andre, if I talk to him. The complexities of race in The Wire. I mean, here you have some people in the black community upset about The Wire and the images it portrayed, people say that the majority of people who wrote The Wire were white, that portrayed, the black characters were a spectrum of humanity in that thing. And how Simon and Ed took the question of honor and justice and living by a certain code. You could be a cop who lived or didn't live by the code. You could be somebody who's honorable or not honorable who was a drug dealer. It didn't make any difference. And I just wonder about the complexity of that. What do you think, how does that fit into your conception of film and acting and the portrayal and the world of blackness in our country and how The Wire was part of that.

You prefaced that by saying it was complicated, and..

Yes, it's complicated. I'm having a hard time even forming the question, it's so complicated.

That's right. So, let's start with this. The way that those of the fairer race look at those of the darker race. Let's do it like that, right. I think is, and vice versa, is pretty much governed by our history, and in one respect, when we look at the history, and I say the history that we are taught here in America, and it's kind of myopic because, and I understand that it has to be for a nation to maintain its integrity, regardless of whether it's true or false or however they look at the accidents that happened in history, their interpretation of them, effect us all. And so, trying to, as a black actor in America, trying to move in this, in this world, or in this, yeah, in this world, carrying our history with us, the pain as well as the guilt, the anger as well as the forgiveness. It is, it's hard, it's something that you'll hit on for a while but you have to push to the side because, at this point in time, it's about this particular gig, it's about this particular job. The Wire allows us, and some other pieces, allow us, August Wilson's things, for example, allow us to access that history and to use some of that American collective consciousness, or work within that, to slowly move boundaries, break down barriers, change stereotypes, and it seems like as black actors, you gotta find some way inside yourself to sometimes use these moments in a cathartic kind of way. There are things that Freamon has said that Clark has always wanted to say. You know, following the money, for example. If you're trying to deal with the drug problem, go to where the problem started. You know, follow the money. If you follow the money, you might wind up in Annapolis. If you follow it further, you might wind up in Washington D.C. You know what I'm saying? But in the main, in doing that, there's a sort of unset collective consciousness that that is, sort of a white, this is the white house. This is the white house, and so, all of this effects how we, how we either approach the roles, or not. The reason why it's complicated is because we have, in the black community, people who are educated, people

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who are not. People want to act because they want to be stars. They're sort of driven by ego. There are black actors who want to tell stories, just want to tell stories. There are black actors who want to tell stories like *The Wire*. There are black actors who want to tell stories like *Bamboozled*. Even within the community, you know, even within the community, sometimes that stuff works for us, and sometimes it works against us. For myself, not having been in America for a long time, when I came back, I was blown away by what I saw on television that looked like.. Everyone's saying, there's a lot, there's a lot of black actors working. I'm looking and I'm thinking, like, this is the stuff that I was told in the 60's was degrading to black people. Why did we take off Amos and Andy, when you have, and it's with respect that I say this about Eddie Murphy, when you've got Eddie Murphy being James Brown in a hot tub. Hello? You know what I'm saying? How can you talk about the blackface about being degrading when you can turn on most of that stuff that was coming on during the 80's and see that same thing happening, you know, in the 80's, when we were arguing about fighting against those things in the 40's and 50's. So, from one generation to the next generation, as well, into all of this, makes it even more complicated how we're going to communicate some integrity and move the whole thing forward, not just for black people but for everybody. We've all got to find a way to accept that what happened in entertainment in the change of the last century is valid for today. If you cut that part of it off from yourself, what are you left with? You don't know where you're coming from, you know? Those guys, Bert Williams was a blackface, but he was a mime. He was a mime. This cat did amazing things, from what we're told. Billy Daniels, who did *That Old Black Magic*, told me that this cat was fantastic. He was like the Marcel Marceau in blackface. There must have been a reason why Ziegfeld said, yeah you, you come here. Cause he had the craft. He had the art. It wasn't just about the rabbit foot minstrels with Ma Rainey doing a shuck and jive, vaudevillian kind of stuff. There was something beyond that, you know. And it's something that, as black people, we shouldn't be afraid of, but when it's put against, when it's set within this collective consciousness of America, then, yes, you can see how it's degrading. You can see how that works. But then if you take those very same faces and you go to Africa, you see the blackface kind of motif, and you see the distorted body dances, and it has a different meaning. They're not doing any.. you can see that they're not doing anything else, except one's on the stage at the Lafayette Theater in Harlem and the other one's in the bush in Uganda.

The lineage becomes clear at some point when you look at that.

Its, that question is really, not only complicated, but it's loaded because..

It is loaded.

There's a, where do you begin? Because this train is moving kind of fast.

And it's interesting that people like the writers who created this, David and Ed, they have a sense of where this country is going, their own interpretation of it. It's very much inside *The Wire*, their view of American capitalism, their view of race in America. But they're tackling it head on, they're not shying away from it. They're not saying, ok, we've done our black thing. Now we're going to do something else. They're not leaving it.

Yeah, no, cause it's about America. It's about America. *The Wire* is now in Europe and the feedback that I get in Europe is really interesting, as well, because I get feedback from Africans who are living in England looking at blacks in America on *The Wire*. Their point of view is completely different to the Englishman's point of view of *The Wire*. And to all of them, my answer is that the reason why this works for you is because there's something in your environment, in your community, that resonates true with *The Wire*. *The Wire* is not just Baltimore. *The Wire* holds a mirror up to you and your city. You will find everything wrong in your city that you will find wrong in *The Wire*. And that's why you're upset. And that's why you're intrigued to find out about it. And that's what keeps you there. Those story lines keep

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you there for sure, but the politics of what's happening in, with the mayoral or the gubernatorial race, hello?

It's right there.

It's right there, you know?

So now, what about, you said earlier, you grew up in Englewood, New Jersey, right? And you made some reference earlier to your dad and Greenwich Village. So, what about your family? What was your dad doing in Greenwich Village? How did you grow up?

Alright, my father was a commercial artist. Actually, on that side of the family, they're all artisans of some sort or another. Even his mother, I remember as a child had a potter's wheel and a kiln in her basement in Brooklyn.

Really?

Yeah. His father was a master carpenter, so that's all of that, I think, fed my father. He won one of those drawing contests, which was to, the prize was to go out to California to work with Disney, alright. And he won that at a very young age, back in the 30's, and he was born in 1923, so, somewhere in the 30's, he wasn't even 20 years old. The story goes that when they saw this black face, they gave him the second prize, rather than give him the first prize. But I don't think that deterred my dad, who was an artist. It was just part of his life. Grandma would rent out rooms in her house in Brooklyn to musicians to come and rehearse in. There's some story floating around in that side of the family that Charlie Parker was down there blowing in Brooklyn, just rehearsing. What else he was doing, I don't know. So my father comes up in this kind of environment and the Village at that point in time was like a cultural center for, when I say cultural, I really mean cultural, because you had European life coming on in, you had the history of blacks who haven't been there already. It was a village that seemed to be safe for artists to be whomever they wanted to be. So pops is in that. So, we grew up, we grew up with that, in that kind of environment, where we're not listening to AM radio. We'll listen to Django Reinhardt, Big Bill Broonzy, the Dandridge Sisters, of course the mainstays, Ellington, Basie, Ella, Stan Getz is coming on into the vibe, so that was the music that was around the house. So, with all of us coming up in that kind of vibe, when we get older, we kind of want to go, where did pops get that? I was born in New York but raised in New Jersey, but I was always trying to get back to the city. Where we grew up, in the city, was next to where the polo grounds used to be, out where there's a democratic congressman from New York, who was in those same projects, I think he came out of there, as well. So, I think that my parents always wanted to be in that kind of environment. When we moved from New York to New Jersey, we moved to Englewood, and Englewood has always been an artists colony, as far as from before Hollywood moved from Fort Lee to Hollywood, only because it was so close to the city for those musicians, so in our town, there was Dizzy Gillespie, Tito Puente, around the corner were the Adderlys, Mickey Baker, Mickey and Sylvia Robinson around the corner, the Isley Brothers are there, Travoltas live over there, you know, went to school with the Bennett's boys, with Tony Bennett's kids. So, this is our environment. This is how we just grew up. That's all we knew, and that was Englewood. So, what was your question.

I was just curious, you mentioned your dad and Greenwich Village, I was just curious about how you grew up, where you grew up, and what influenced you as a young guy to end up where you are now.

It's all of that. It's all of that. It's all of that. I always sort of, on my mother's side, that's African and Native American, from Georgia, South Carolina, coming up that route. So, this mixture of two, almost cultures, because my paternal grandparents were from Barbados. And so, I grew up with not , "Eh,

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buddy," it's more like, "How you doing, mate?" It wasn't "al(?)" It was "amuse." I didn't know any different, those are just, it wasn't until later on, I thought, "Oh.."

And I didn't know that you'd, I have to apologize for this, until I was reading about this the other day, you wrote "Five Guys Named Moe."

Yeah, I'm working on another one right now, cause this is the centennial of Louis Jordan, so the BBC have asked me to put something together for him over there, which I wanted to talk to you about again.

Oh, that's phenomenal. I love "Five Guys Named Moe," by the way. I saw it in the city when it was on. And I just, you wrote that shit? I didn't know that.

I'm gonna stick 5 chicks with them and call it "And Five Mo." But we've got to get more of Louis'... It was my first foray into writing anything, and it was a blessing that it came up like that. I knew that people wanted to party, but I also wanted to do, I'd done a series of these things in London. I worked with my mentor whose name was Ned Sherrin, who passed away, beginning of October last year. And Ned brought to America "That Was the Week That Was." I mean, he was the satirical writer, Oxford, Cambridge educated, really establishment, but always just a little bit stickin' his foot in the establishment's butt. He being my mentor also opened up different ways to try to celebrate Louis Jordan's life, rather than saying and then he wrote this and then he wrote that, it was more about just trying to get the persona of Louis Jordan as this fun loving musician who had all these little anecdotes that are set to music that would address any situation in your life.

How did you end up in London? How did you go from a young guy that wanted to be in the arts, coming out of Englewood and New York, ended up being in London, an ex-pat?

Well, if you're that young person that wants to get into the arts, and particularly theater, even for America, the roots of theater are in London, are in England. I was in Paris before that, I had gone to visit my brother who had moved to Paris in about '68 I think. He was at Goddard College and he went over there to do some research on Isadore Duncan's brother Bernard, who was an artisan. Again, artisans, they just move in our family. And he never came back. So, in '71 I was asked, if I'm going to go to Paris, make sure I bring Tony back for Thanksgiving. He was doing the show Hair in Paris, and I had been auditioning for it here in America, and I didn't know T was in it when I was auditioning for it. I auditioned in New York, in Washington, in Boston, in San Francisco. It was just like, they saw me coming, it was like a laugh, hey here comes Clarke, hehe, bring him on in, watch this audition, HA HA, you know? But I got over there, and something happened where my brother didn't show up, and I walked onstage and took his place. And so that was my first professional gig.

That was where? That was in...

That was in Paris.

That was in Paris.

While I was there, I had met Leroy Wiggins and Tyrone Scott, who were both in the companies and worked with Motown backing singers and all this kind of stuff over the years. They had actually come to England before I did, it was actually on their invitation that I came to England, to just demo a song. Well, I come and we demo this song and I swear it was like a film where David Platz, who's the head of Essex Music was leaving the bathroom and heard us rehearsing and asked who they were. They just demoed a song. Well, why don't we see what we can do for them. And in two weeks, the last thing on my mind was thinking about songwriting, I had signed a songwriting contract, a publishing contract, a recording contract, and now I'm a recording artist with a group in London called The Majestics. We stayed together

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about three years, and when that group disbanded I went right back into theater and I didn't move from that because that's what I wanted to do from the very beginning.

I've noticed that, when I was reading a little piece on you yesterday, it was very short and that's where I saw the "Five Guys Named Moe" thing that, actually Justin sent over to me, was that, it was interesting, when I looked at your theater work in London, and I looked at your theater work in America, maybe I have this wrong but my first impression was, that the theater work in London was almost non-racial, color-blind. Your theater work in America seemed to be mostly black.

That's right.

That struck me, as I looked at that.

I wish more people could see that because what that indicates for me, or one way to look at that, as a type of barometer for theater, and the arts, is that theater is a part of British culture. Theater being the craft of storytelling is a part of British culture. It's educational and it's entertaining. It's part of their culture. In America, it's a commodity. It's not part of our culture. It's a commodity. And so, I, as a soul wrapped in a black body, become that commodity on that particular shelf. So, if you want that, let's get that from that shelf and put it there because those are the components that this country looks at because it's a commodity. Whereas, in London, I'm playing Sky Masterson opposite a white Sarah. Unheard of. I'm playing Darrell Van Horn in "Witches of Eastwick." To have a black devil in America will send all other kinds of things. To have a black devil in England, it's just, so what? He's playing a devil. You know what I'm saying? It's nuances like that in the arts that keep me there, you know, allows me to go ahead and just play. It's about theater and that's why they call it a play. Hello? It don't get much simpler than that. Even coming back here, I do find it hard to get back into this racial mindset. It doesn't make me any less politically aware of what's happening with black people here in America. It doesn't mean that I have to just do black jobs. I'm going to continue to try to keep breaking down these barriers here in America because they need to be broken down. I have spent time in Africa. I know what Africa is about. I'm not a black person in America saying I'm an African-American and have never stepped foot off of the block. I'm coming to it with an enormous amount of experience as to who and why I am, and where I am here. But it still is a drag to just have to play the black parts, or to hear it like that. And having said that, I did this film called "Mona Lisa" with Neil Jordan. I put it to Neil at that point in time, I said, I don't want to play another pimp. I'm tired of doing this because those are the kind of roles I was getting, that were beginning to come to me in England and this particular one was one that was nasty and insidious and evil, and at the end of the show it was written that he just disappears into the night. And I put it to him, like, hey, a cat like this needs to be squashed. So, they changed the ending of that, to have this black criminal killed. Well, I didn't shoot another film for ten years.

You did not?

I didn't. And nothing was said about it, it's just that that's how things went.

I was thinking, it makes me think of the character you just did on The Wire, Lester Freamon. He was probably the most deeply intellectual character in the whole ensemble of characters, which I really liked.

Me too. When I was saying earlier that he allowed, Freamon allowed, Clarke to say things that he probably would not normally have the platform to say, or to behave in a way that.. and what was good about Freamon for myself is that he had all the exposition. He was the cat that explained things, he explained how to do the research to find out where the money is. He's the cat that said take a look at that nail, that nail is different from that one over there. It's nice being that character because, for myself,

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I had to understand what Ed and David were writing in those first, those first couple of seasons about breaking down how these things work, how the wiretap works, and what they're doing, they just can't fabricate it. It's got to be legitimate. So, I'm learning through the process, as well. Before I did this, if someone said "follow the money," I wouldn't know where to begin. But because I've had to explain to Sydnor and to the other youngsters how to do that, or because Freamon had to, now Clarke knows it.

Well, that's part of being an actor, too. You learn a lot as an actor. If you really do it right, you learn a lot as an actor.

If you do it right, you will learn it.

This character was the embodiment of intellect and integrity.

Yeah. And that's a blessing. I thank god that I got that role, in that respect, because I think that it's, that's what, I think, being outside of America and coming back to it allows me a certain viewpoint, a vantage point to view from, on how to celebrate these kind of people and how important they are. If he gets angry, it's because he has a really good reason to be angry. There used to be a time when people would fight to solve their differences. Now, they just take out a gun and that's the end of it. So, life becomes cheap. But for Lester, life is very important, and the quality of your life is very important. And it's really for all of us to get this machine called America working properly. That's Lester's. For Clarke, this thing called America is something that has been sold to the rest of the world, and it's damn good idea because the rest of the world wants it. But, we've gotta get it right in order to make sure that the product that we're selling has the integrity that we say it has. And it's not easy. It's not easy to manage a nation of, what, three hundred some odd million people. So, it's nice having worn Lester, and to have, to be attributed with his intellect. His intellect is not Clarke's intellect. I'm an actor, but he's opened up my eyes. And I have friends now because of that who can help facilitate some of the changes that are necessary, whether it's Baltimore, or whether it's up and down this whole eastern corridor, with the drugs and the gangs and all of that kind of stuff, that is not only diminishing and neutralizing our community, it's having a knock-on effect to other communities around, as well. It's not always just a racial thing. Sometimes people say it's a racial thing. Most of the time I think it's more an economic thing that has a sort of racial cover put on top of it. The problem is economic. The problem is education. And when those things are addressed properly, not even just seen to be addressed, but are actually addressed properly, then I think we wind of living the Amer.. we can live the American dream properly, because there'd be no reason for anyone to be angry, unless it's your own shit that you're carrying with you. And it doesn't matter whether you're black, white, Native American, Indian, or an immigrant from Europe.

I agree.

You've heard about the film, The Wire.

They're making a movie, The Wire?

Well, I'm putting it out there.

I like the idea.

It was sort of being floated around last year because it just seems like it's so popular, that it could easily go in that direction. What the storyline would be, where it would go from here? It can't be episode, it can't be season six, it has to be an entity unto itself that addresses all of this stuff again, you know?

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Produced by Jessica Phillips and Justin Levy.
Engineering assistance from Andrew Eppig, Liz Buckel, Nick Sjostrom, and Devin Murphy.

Studio space generously provided by Clean Cuts Music and Sound Design.
Hosted by Marc Steiner.

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Andre Royo, the Character "Bubbles"

Interview date: 03 March 2008

Introduction:

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

On Sunday March 9th, 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 is 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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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.

You're listening to a production of the Center for Emerging Media. Our producers are Justin Levy and Jessica Phillips. Engineering assistance from Liz Buckel and thanks to Clean Cuts Sound Design for our studio space. To hear more and learn more, visit us on the web at www.marcsteinerblog.wordpress.com. And from the Center for Emerging Media, I'm Marc Steiner.

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