

THE WIRE

Series Wrap-Up

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 he 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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