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PROFILES

STEALING LIFE

The crusader behind “The Wire.”

by Margaret Talbot

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On a muggy August afternoon in Baltimore, trash scuttled down Guilford



Avenue, the breeze smelling like rain and asphalt. It was the last week of shooting for the fifth and final season of the HBO drama “The Wire,” and the crew was filming a scene in front of a boarded-up elementary school. Cast members had been joined by forty or so day players—mostly kids from the neighborhood. Earlier, the episode’s director, Clark Johnson, had been giving some of the kids the chance to say “Cut!,” and they’d bellowed it like drunks at a surprise party. Now, when Johnson yelled “Cut,” the kids swarmed around a video monitor to look at themselves in the last shot, pointing and laughing. “He just said it was good,” one kid complained. “Why we gotta do it again?” Johnson, who was wearing what he called his “lucky cowboy hat,” stepped away to talk to one of the professional actors. Another man—a bald white guy, unprepossessing in jeans and a T-shirt—remained by the monitor, and he answered the kids: “Hey. He’s the *director*. You don’t believe him? He kinda, sorta knows what he’s doin’.” The bald guy was David Simon, the show’s creator: a former *Baltimore Sun* reporter who figured that he’d spend his life at a newspaper, a print journalist who has forged an improbable career in television without ever leaving Baltimore. The kids listened politely to Simon and ran back to their places.

Each season of “The Wire” has focussed, with sociological precision, on a different facet of Baltimore. The previous season featured a story line about the city’s anarchic schools, told partly through the character of Roland (Prez) Pryzbylewski, a young cop turned schoolteacher. Simon recalled, “On the first day, the kids were all cutting up and yelling. It was like the first day of school. You know how they kicked the shit out of Pryzbylewski emotionally on the show? The kids were doing the same to the assistant directors. One poor A.D. was, like, ‘Please! This is too fuckin’ meta.’ By the end of the year, we had a good crew of young actors, but in the beginning it was, as we say in Baltimore, like herding pigeons.” While Simon was telling this story, Jermaine Crawford, a fourteen-year-old who joined the cast last season, came over to hug him. The scene being filmed would mark the final appearance of Crawford, whose character, Dukie, comes from a family in which all the adults are addicted to drugs or alcohol.

Much of the new season, which will begin airing in January, will take place at a downsizing newspaper called the *Baltimore Sun*. Johnson, back at the monitor, began teasing Simon for giving so many of his old *Sun* colleagues small parts on the show. Among the dozens of people who have recurrent parts or cameos are Simon’s former editor, Rebecca Corbett, now an editor at the *Times*; the former *Sun*

political reporter Bill Zorzi, now a writer for “The Wire”; Steve Luxenberg, the editor who first hired Simon as a reporter at the *Sun*; and Simon’s wife, Laura Lippman, a crime novelist who used to be a *Sun* reporter.

“It was like a frat house the other day, with all your newspaper pals around here,” Johnson told Simon. “What, you think somebody in Iowa’s gonna be watching and go, ‘Look, honey, it’s Bill Zorzi!’?” Warming to his riff, he added, “You ever try playing off these people who’ve never acted before? Somebody yells ‘Action,’ and they stand here like this”—he made a blank fish face.

Johnson is an actor as well as a director. He played a detective on “Homicide,” the NBC cop series based on Simon’s 1991 book by the same name, about murder in Baltimore, and in the new season of “The Wire” he plays Gus Haynes, a city editor who tries to hold the line against dwindling coverage, buyouts, and pseudo-news. In the season opener, Haynes provides a bitingly funny introduction to newsroom culture. He complains about a photographer who invariably gooses the poignancy of fire scenes by positioning a charred doll somewhere amid the debris. (“I can see that cheatin’ motherfucker now, with his fucking harem of dolls, pouring lighter fluid on each one,” Haynes fumes.) And he patiently explains to a junior reporter one of those house rules which arbiters of newspaper style cling to with fierce persnickiteness: a building can be “evacuated,” he instructs, but you cannot evacuate people. “To evacuate a person is to give that person an enema,” one of the old-timers chimes in. “At the Baltimore *Sun*, God still resides in the details.”

The *Sun*

allowed its name to be used on “The Wire,” but stipulated that no current employees could appear in it; the newspaper’s offices have been re-created on the show’s hulking soundstage outside the city. This arrangement suited Simon fine—he bitterly accepted a buyout offer from the paper in 1995, feeling that it was squandering talent under new management. “The Wire,” Simon often says, is a show about how contemporary American society—and, particularly, “raw, unencumbered capitalism”—devalues human beings. He told me, “Every single moment on the planet, from here on out, human beings are worth less. We are in a post-industrial age. We don’t need as many of us as we once did. So, if the first season was about devaluing the cops who knew their beats and the corner boys slinging drugs, then the second was about devaluing the longshoremen and their labor, the third about people who wanted to make changes in the city, and the fourth was about kids who were being prepared, badly, for an economy that no longer really needs them. And the fifth? It’s about the people who are supposed to be monitoring all this and sounding the alarm—the journalists. The newsroom I worked in had four hundred and fifty people. Now it’s got three hundred. Management says, ‘We have to do more with less.’ That’s the bullshit of bean counters who care only about the bottom line. You do *less* with less.”

Some of the dialogue from the fifth season is taken word for word from the *Sun*’s newsroom. Simon recalled, “There was this writer, Carl, who every day would eat the same thing for lunch: cottage cheese. One day, somebody walked by and saw him staring down into his cottage cheese, poking it with a spoon and saying to himself, ‘Fuck, fuck, fuckity fuck.’ That’s in there.”

Finely tuned as Simon’s ear is for the newsroom, it is perhaps even better calibrated for the street corner and the precinct, having been sharpened by thirteen years of daily crime reporting. Viewers of “The Wire” must master a whole argot, though it can take a while, because the words are never defined, just as they wouldn’t be by real people tossing them around. To have “suction” is to have pull with your higher-ups on the police force or in City Hall; a “redball” is a high-profile case with political consequences; to “re-up” is to get more drugs to sell. Drugs are branded with names taken from the latest news cycle: Pandemic, W.M.D., Greenhouse Gas. “The game” is the drug trade, although it emerges during the course of the show as a metaphor for the web of constraints that political and economic institutions impose on the people trapped within them. And, in one memorable neologism, a penis is referred to as a “Charles Dickens.”

Because Simon and his primary writing partner, Ed Burns—a former Baltimore homicide detective who was once one of Simon’s sources—are both middle-aged white men, people tend to assume that the dialogue spoken by the drug dealers and ghetto kids is ad-libbed by the black actors on the show. In fact, one of the show’s writers was always present on the set, keeping the actors on script. A single dropped word was noted and corrected. Gbenga Akinagbe, the actor who plays a drug dealer’s henchman named Chris Partlow, said, “This is David’s domain. He gets the streets of Baltimore better than we do.” The novelist Dennis Lehane (“Mystic River”), whom Simon hired to write several scripts, agrees: “When you hear the really authentic street poetry in the dialogue, that’s David, or Ed Burns. Anything that’s literally 2006 or 2007 African-American ghetto dialogue—that’s them. They are so much further ahead of the curve on that.”

The show’s departure from Hollywood formulas may be nowhere more palpable than in its routine use of nonactors to fill the minor roles. No other television drama, it seems safe to say, features an actor whom one of the show’s lead writers helped put in prison with a thirty-four-year sentence. That is Melvin Williams, a Baltimore drug kingpin whom Ed Burns nabbed in a wiretap investigation in 1984; Simon reported on the case for the *Sun*. Williams plays the part of the Deacon, a community leader both savvy and wise. The former Baltimore mayor Kurt Schmoke, an advocate of drug decriminalization, has a small role as the city’s health commissioner; the character works with a police commander who creates an experimental zone, which the street kids call Hamsterdam, where drug users won’t be arrested. The former Republican governor of Maryland Robert Ehrlich shows up as a state trooper on the governor’s detail in a scene where the Democratic mayor of Baltimore comes to Annapolis to ask for a bailout. People whom Simon reported on appear in cameos as city clerks, drug counsellors, corner boys, hired muscle. “These jokes don’t

impair anyone else's viewing," Simon explained. "But when Kurt Schmoke advocates for drug decriminalization as the city health commissioner, there's an extra kick for the locals. But here's the other thing: these are faces you don't see on television, the faces and voices of the real city."

Simon is an authenticity freak. He said, "I'm the kind of person who, when I'm writing, cares above all about whether the people I'm writing about will recognize themselves. I'm not thinking about the general reader. My greatest fear is that the people in the world I'm writing about will read it and say, 'Nah, there's nothing there.' "

Near twilight, Simon headed over to the location for the next scene: a parking lot under the highway that is directly across from the Baltimore *Sun*

building. There the crew had set up a small, pretend encampment for homeless people. Cars rattled along the highway above, like marbles in a chute. The parking lot reeked, authentically, of urine.

Filming on city streets in marginal neighborhoods carries its peculiar risks and rewards. On one occasion, a car involved in a high-speed chase smashed into one of the actors' cars, and everybody had to dive out of the way. Another time, a man got shot yards away, staggered onto the set trailing blood, and was treated by the show's medic. Once, a man pressed a package of heroin into the hands of Andre Royo, the actor who plays the sympathetic junkie and police informant Bubbles, saying, "Man, you need a fix more than I do." Royo refers to that moment as his "street Oscar."

That night, the streets were a little quieter, but there was still the circus-comes-to-town bustle of a location shoot. The blue lights of an ambulance and a police car, which were featured in the homeless-people scene, pulsed in the darkness. Simon stood in the middle of it all, and crew members ran up to him with the smallest of questions: Do you like the way they've laid out the sleeping bags? What about the way the ambo and the squad car are positioned?

Gone are the days when Simon, who was a writer on "Homicide" but didn't run the show, couldn't get Johnson to say something he didn't think his character would say. Back then, Simon lacked suction. As Johnson waited for the lighting crew to finish setting up, he and Simon reminisced about how Johnson had repeated one "Homicide" speech over and over, purposely dropping a line that Simon had written. Simon recalled the episode: "That was 'Scene of the Crime.' Episode 421. Possibly 422." Now Simon is the court of last resort. The actor Tom McCarthy, who plays a reporter, came over to ask a question about the upcoming scene. McCarthy pointed out that his character was supposed to be coming back from a City Council meeting that had run late into the night. Would he really put a quarter in the parking meter at that hour, as the script indicated? "Hell, yeah," Simon said cheerfully, inviting McCarthy to take a closer look at one of the nearby meters—they were in effect twenty-four hours a day.

"You're right," McCarthy said. "You're right." With a mixture of admiration and irritation, he added, "Gee, it's great to have you on the set!"

The *Wire* debuted in June, 2002, looking more or less like a cop show. But the differences were important. It spent as much time with the lawbreakers as it did with the law enforcers. And you didn't see the suspects through the cops' eyes only—you saw them through their own as well. The drug trade emerged as its own intricate bureaucracy, a hierarchy that subtly mirrored that of the police department. Moreover, "The Wire" did not rely on the jumpy handheld-camera shots and the blurry "swish pans" that a lot of network cop shows had adopted. The camera remained locked, for minutes at a time, on people talking. And the story unfolded at a slower pace, too, which meant that many of the scenes elaborated on the characters and the power structures they moved within, rather than lay the pipe of plot.

Simon delivered the pilot to HBO in November, 2001. Soon after, he met the novelist George Pelecanos at the funeral of a mutual friend. Pelecanos, like Simon, grew up in the Washington suburb of Silver Spring, Maryland; attended the University of Maryland, in College Park; and was deeply interested in the fate of the American city and, in particular, of the black urban poor. After the funeral, he gave Simon a ride. As Pelecanos recalls it, Simon told him that "The Wire" would be "a novel for television. Not in a 'Rich Man, Poor Man' sense. Each episode would be like a chapter in a book. You could digress, in the way a novel does. And it would be about the social aspects of crime." Pelecanos, who wrote seven episodes for the show, said, "That struck home, because if it's not about something more than the mystery, the thriller part, I'm not going to do it. Life's too short."

The show's title referred to the wiretap that a unit of the Baltimore police force was using to keep a local drug organization under surveillance. Ultimately, the term suggested more—the way that the show allowed viewers to eavesdrop on various recondite power plays, and the way that poverty, politics, and policing were interconnected in a struggling post-industrial city. In Simon's view, "The Wire" was never "a cop show. We were always planning to move further and further out, to build a whole city."

Simon makes it clear that the show's ambitions were grand. " 'The Wire' is dissent," he says. "It is perhaps the only storytelling on television that overtly suggests that our political and economic and social constructs are no longer viable, that our leadership has failed us relentlessly, and that no, we are not going to be all right." He also likes to say that "The Wire" is a story about the "decline of the American empire." Simon's belief in the show is a formidable thing, and it leads him into some ostentatious comparisons that he sometimes laughs at himself for and sometimes does not. Recently, he spoke at Loyola College, in Baltimore; he described the show in lofty terms that left many of the students in the audience puzzled—at least, those who had come hoping to hear how they might get a job in Hollywood. In creating "The Wire," Simon said, he and his colleagues had "ripped off the Greeks: Sophocles,

Aeschylus, Euripides. Not funny boy—not Aristophanes. We’ve basically taken the idea of Greek tragedy and applied it to the modern city-state.” He went on, “What we were trying to do was take the notion of Greek tragedy, of fated and doomed people, and instead of these Olympian gods, indifferent, venal, selfish, hurling lightning bolts and hitting people in the ass for no reason—instead of those guys whipping it on Oedipus or Achilles, it’s the postmodern institutions . . . those are the indifferent gods.”

When Simon pitched “The Wire” to Carolyn Strauss, now the president of HBO Entertainment, he did not mention Greek tragedy or the decline of the American empire. With only one executive-producing credit—for the HBO miniseries “The Corner,” based on a 1997 book he co-wrote with Ed Burns, about the Baltimore drug world—he knew better. Instead, he argued that HBO might understandably be reluctant to do a cop show—cop shows, like hospital shows, were TV, not HBO—but that was, in fact, precisely why the network should do it. Now that HBO had created dramas about subjects the networks avoided (the Mafia, prisons), it was time to expose what the networks did as fraudulent. In what Simon calls a “begging-ass memo” to Strauss, he wrote:

It is a significant victory for HBO to counter program alternative, inaccessible worlds against standard network fare. But it would, I will argue, be a more profound victory for HBO to take the essence of network fare and smartly turn it on its head, so that no one who sees HBO’s take on the culture of crime and crime fighting can watch anything like “C.S.I.” or “N.Y.P.D. Blue” or “Law & Order” again without knowing that every punch was pulled on those shows. For HBO to step toe-to-toe with NBC or ABC and create a cop show that seizes the highest qualitative ground through realism, good writing, and a more brutal assessment of police, police work, and the drug culture—this may not be the beginning of the end for network dramas as the industry standard, but it is certainly the end of the beginning for HBO.

For a begging-ass memo, it was supremely confident in tone. Strauss got used to such displays, and to the impassioned e-mails that Simon dashed off. “He’s quick with the incendiary memo,” Strauss said. “I think he puts as much into those written pleas as he does into writing his characters.”

It took HBO more than a year to green-light the show. The pilot script, written by Simon and Burns, did not sufficiently impress Strauss and Chris Albrecht, then the chairman of HBO; Simon had to write two more episodes. Once the show finally entered production, there were skirmishes that helped pin down Simon’s vision: HBO wanted to cut an early sequence in which Omar—a stickup artist—steals money from drug dealers who hadn’t been introduced to viewers and who wouldn’t appear again. But Simon argued, successfully, that the scene had to stay in, because over time Omar’s importance would become clear, and because the show would lose its insider feel if it explained too much.

Rafael Alvarez, a former *Sun* reporter whom Simon hired to write for the show, said, “You know how, in a Russian novel, the reader does the work for the first hundred pages, and then it turns and you’re lost in it? With ‘The Wire,’ it might be Episode 6 before it turns and you’re in.” The creators of “The Wire” would never say that their work is as good as that of Tolstoy or Dickens, but they can’t quite resist the comparison, either.

“The Wire” has never won an Emmy—in fact, it has been nominated only once, for Pelecanos’s script about the murder of Stringer Bell, the drug boss who imagined himself as a legitimate businessman. Its audience is modest. Last season, about 4.4 million people a week watched “The Wire.” “The Sopranos,” by contrast, had thirteen million viewers a week last season, and “Big Love,” considered a marginal hit, had six. On any other network, “The Wire” would not have been renewed after the first season, and even on HBO its continuation was far from certain. As Simon sees it, there was a “kind of fever” at HBO for a while after “The Sopranos” and “Sex and the City” generated so much heat and so much money, and magnified expectations of what a high-end cable outlet can do. Everybody was hungrily looking for the next one. But those shows were beautiful mutants.” In the meantime, “if you weren’t getting those numbers, it was, like, This is good and we like it, and critics like it, so we could order up another season, but, you know, we could also take this thirty or forty million and go develop three or four more pilots, one of which might become a ‘Sopranos’ or ‘Sex and the City.’ ” Simon felt that “The Wire” was particularly vulnerable after its third season. But Albrecht—who has since left HBO (following an arrest in Las Vegas for assaulting his girlfriend)—liked the media focus of the projected fifth season. And Strauss, Simon said, was “crazy about the kids” in the fourth season: “She said, ‘We can’t cancel this—this is what we do well.’ ”

Despite having what Simon jokes is an “audience of seventeen on Sunday night,” “The Wire” has been a hit with two groups in particular: people who identify with the inner-city characters, and critics. “The Wire” is the first HBO drama to be syndicated to BET. Bootleg copies of the DVDs circulate widely in the mostly black and poor neighborhoods of West Baltimore. One day during the recent season, Simon got a call from Felicia (Snoop) Pearson, who plays a butch little killer with a Baltimore street accent so thick that some viewers might be tempted to turn on closed captioning for her dialogue. (Pearson’s role on “The Wire” is her first acting job; she spent most of her adolescence in a Maryland state prison, serving time for second-degree murder, and has since been trying to turn her life around.) Pearson told Simon that she had just collared a guy who was trying to sell her a bootleg DVD of “The Wire,” and wanted to know what to do with him. A bemused Simon told her to set him loose: “What are you gonna do, Snoop, hold him for the HBO authorities?” The HBO message boards are full of testimonials that suggest an affinity between “Wire” fans and “Wire” characters. “My favorite character is Michael because his character and me are the same I was raised in the streetz and had to take care of me and my people thats why alot of people call me streetz and it’s tatted on my hand”; “I like ma nigga Bodie sad 2

see him go he waz a true ridah!”

Critics, meanwhile, have compared the show to a great Victorian novel. The *Chicago Tribune*, *Salon*, and the *San Francisco Chronicle* have called it the best show on television. Jacob Weisberg, writing in *Slate*, went even further, declaring that “The Wire” was the best American television series that had ever been broadcast: “No other program has ever done anything remotely like what this one does, namely to portray the social, political, and economic life of an American city with the scope, observational precision, and moral vision of great literature.” Sometimes the fan base of “The Wire” seems like the demographics of many American cities—mainly the urban poor and the affluent elite, with the middle class hollowed out.

A favorite phrase of David Simon’s is “You can’t make this shit up.” In the opening sequence of the very first episode of “The Wire,” Jimmy McNulty—the half mensch, half jerk of a Baltimore cop, played by the British actor Dominic West—is sitting on a stoop across from a crime scene. McNulty is talking to the compatriot of a dead guy called Snot Boogie, and can’t resist a little philosophizing on the subject of his name: “This kid, whose mama went to the trouble to christen him Omar Isaiah Betts—you know, he forgets his jacket, so his nose starts runnin’ and some asshole, instead of giving him a Kleenex, he calls him Snot. So he’s Snot forever. It doesn’t seem fair.” Snot Boogie liked to shoot craps with his pals in the neighborhood, it seems, but, every time he did, he’d steal the pot before the end of the game. So why, McNulty wants to know, did they still let him play? “Got to,” his interlocutor answers. “This is America, man.” It was a perfectly crafted setup for Simon’s themes: how inner-city life could be replete with both casual cruelty and unexpected comedy; how the police and the policed could, at moments, share the same jaundiced view of the world; how some dollar-store, off-brand version of American capitalism could trickle down, with melancholy effect, into the most forsaken corners of American society. But, as it happened, the Snot Boogie story was real—Simon had heard it, down to the line about America, from a police detective, and it appears in “Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets.” Simon’s gift is in recognizing an anecdote like that for the found parable that it is—“stealing life,” as he once described it to me—and knowing which parts to steal.

Of course, in producing “The Wire,” Simon and his colleagues did make a lot of shit up. And yet nearly every scene is grounded in documentary truth. This became clear at the writers’ meetings, which were equal parts urban-studies seminar, reporters’ bull session, and Hollywood story conference. The writers’ office is in a former bank in an old out-of-the-way waterfront district of Baltimore called Canton. Simon, Ed Burns, Bill Zorzi, and a young writer named Chris Collins sat around a table. Simon had a laptop open in front of him. In the middle of the table was a basket full of dried cranberries, Fig Newtons, and jelly beans. On the wall was a long sheet of butcher paper, divided into a grid: the name of each member of the show’s ensemble was written in marker on the side; the episodes, identified by number, were notated along the top. Above the butcher paper were head shots of all the major actors on “The Wire.” As the writers decided what would happen to each character in a given episode, Collins would write a brief description of that plot point, or “beat,” on a colored index card and pushpin it to the appropriate box on the grid. But a lot of the discussion on the days I was at the writers’ office had to do with the larger political themes of the show.

One morning in February, Simon—his hands laced behind his head, elbows jutting out—talked about the character of Tommy Carcetti, a venal pol with an idealistic streak, who by Season Five has been elected mayor of Baltimore. Carcetti faces any number of challenges, from bad crime statistics and floundering schools to the fundamental fact that—as he put it during his run for mayor—“tomorrow morning, I still wake up white in a city that ain’t.” (Carcetti is deftly played by the Irish actor Aidan Gillen.) That morning, Simon and his colleagues were analyzing how Carcetti’s ambitions to become the governor of Maryland are molding his agenda in the mayor’s office. Simon noted that Carcetti had promoted education reform in Season Four. “He’s gotta show that test scores have gone up,” he said.

“For the first and second grade,” Burns said sarcastically.

“Right,” Simon said. “It’s always just the first and second grade.” Simon was wearing jeans and a T-shirt, his standard outfit. (His lone sartorial affectation is a black porkpie hat of the type favored by jazz musicians in the nineteen-fifties.) He looked as if he could easily play one of the cops or a longshoreman. Every once in a while, he got up, thrust his hands deep in his pockets, and paced in front of the window, with its distant view of downtown Baltimore. Burns is silver-haired and pink-cheeked, and, in his homey cardigan, might suggest Mr. Rogers, if Mr. Rogers were a brainy, cynical, and profane former homicide detective.

Burns said, “Carcetti is, like, ‘I don’t want to be the education mayor—the numbers aren’t good.’ His advisers go down the list: environmental mayor, this, that, and the other thing. He tries on a few roles, and they just don’t have the juice. But then he decides on the homelessness issue—this is great stuff. And he runs with it.” Eventually, Burns suggested, Carcetti would learn a little about the complicated reality of homelessness, “but he’s not interested in the reality. He wants a silver bullet.” Maybe, Burns went on, Carcetti could acquire some FEMA

trailers to shelter the homeless of Baltimore, and talk grandiloquently about how the homeless situation is a disaster on the scale of Hurricane Katrina. Zorzi, the former political reporter, rejected this as implausible: how would the Democratic mayor of Baltimore get trailers from the Bush Administration?

This final season of the show, Simon told me, will be about “perception versus reality”—in particular, what kind of reality newspapers can capture and what they can’t. Newspapers across the country are shrinking, laying off beat reporters who understood

their turf. More important, Simon believes, newspapers are fundamentally not equipped to convey certain kinds of complex truths. Instead, they focus on scandals—stories that have a clean moral. “It’s like, Find the eight-hundred-dollar toilet seat, find the contractor who’s double-billing,” Simon said at one point. “That’s their bread and butter. Systemic societal failure that has multiple problems—newspapers are not designed to understand it.”

If Simon’s characters were to deliver the kind of doomy social criticism that Simon does, “The Wire” would, as he likes to say, “lay there like a bagel.” Fortunately, his characters bristle with humor, quirks, private sorrows; his drug dealers express intricate opinions about Baltimore radio stations, chicken nuggets, and chess. One reason for this is that the writers knew people like them. Burns knew plenty of drug dealers as a homicide detective and plenty of inner-city teen-agers when, like Detective Pryzbylewski, he left the force and became a teacher in the Baltimore city schools. Zorzi knew plenty of city and state politicians when he was a tough, cranky *Sun*

reporter who would never eat so much as a carrot stick from a buffet paid for by a candidate. As a crime reporter for the *Sun*, Simon knew plenty of junkies, snitches, cops, and people just trying to keep their heads down and get by in violent neighborhoods. Simon can be scathing, even righteous, about other television shows that presume to depict urban America without the benefit of direct knowledge. As he told the audience at Loyola, “So much of what comes out of Hollywood is horseshit. Because these people live in West L.A., they don’t even go to East L.A. The only time they go downtown is to get their license renewed. And what they increasingly know about the world is what they see on other TV shows about cops or crime or poverty. The American entertainment industry gets poverty so relentlessly wrong. . . . Poor people are either the salt of the earth, and they’re there to exalt us with their homespun wisdom and their sheer grit and determination to rise up, or they are people to be beaten up in an interrogation room by Sipowicz. . . . How is it that there’s nobody actually on a human scale from the other America? The reason is they’ve never met anybody from the other America. I mean, they could ask their gardener what it’s like.”

The writers began to see Season Five as a tragicomic collision between homeless people, newspaper reporters, politicians, and the cops we’ve come to know. Carcetti, they decided, would suffer some significant collateral damage. “I actually feel bad for him,” Simon said, laughing. “He’s doing his job here, which is basically: be on the right side of some issue and exalt your achievement.”

Over the next several days, the writers poked holes in each other’s ideas and, like Greek gods, mapped out the fates of the characters. Most of the trajectories were grim, but one troubled character, they decided, would pull himself together and enjoy what George Pelecanos calls one of the show’s “inglorious redemptions—not Rocky knocking the Russian out in the ninth round but somebody getting through to the other side.” Simon often says that “The Wire” refuses to indulge in the “life-affirming” messages that are woven into the fabric of network TV. Still, he seemed glad to incorporate this small victory into an otherwise rigorously unsentimental picture. “We don’t have a lot of victories,” Simon told his colleagues. “As cynically as the rest of this stuff is ending, it will validate the one place we put any of our sincerity, which is individual action.” It’s hard to classify Simon politically, but anytime you start thinking of him as some sort of bleeding-heart socialist you’re brought up short by his unremitting skepticism about institutions.

During the writers’ meetings, Burns and Simon often finished each other’s sentences. They met in 1985, when Simon was covering the criminal career of Melvin Williams, and Burns was the lead detective investigating him. Burns had an encyclopedic knowledge of the Baltimore drug trade, a conviction that he was right about most things, and an autodidact’s intellectualism. When Simon first arranged to meet Burns, at a public library, he discovered him with a stack of books, including John Fowles’s “The Magus” and a volume by Hannah Arendt. “Once I found him, I didn’t let go,” Simon told me. After they finished writing Season Five of “The Wire,” they teamed up again on Simon’s next project for HBO: a miniseries called “Generation Kill,” based on the 2004 book, by Evan Wright, about a Marine platoon in Iraq. Simon recalled, “Ed used to drive the other cops crazy because he knew better at every point how to do an investigation, and then when he got the cases to court he would tell the prosecutors how to present them. He pissed them off. And when he was in the school system the assistant principals learned to hate him.” In the early days of “The Wire,” Simon said, he and Burns used to have “hellacious” arguments—he compared them to scenes from “a toxic marriage.” He continued, “I finally said to him, ‘I’m not going to abdicate. I always have to trust my own ideas in the end. I’ll pick the ones out of your sixty ideas that I think are going to work, and I’ll leave the others on the table.’ But there were also moments when he fought really hard for something and in the end I saw it.” Burns, Simon said, “always pushes me further than I would go on my own.” He is the show’s policy visionary—the one who, Simon half joked, “is only working in TV till somebody realizes that they ought to give him all the money to fix our social problems.”

Before shooting began in April, scene-by-scene blueprints for the first four episodes were doled out to various writers. The most prolific are Simon and Burns, along with Lehane, Pelecanos, and the novelist Richard Price. All the scripts, Pelecanos said, are minutely mapped out. “In the end, the final word is David’s,” he said. “I have come to where I try and write in his voice. We have an expression—‘You give it up.’ There were times when David and I were going at it pretty hard and I managed to get a lot of what I wanted. Other times, maybe thirty per cent of what I’d written made it into the final script. But he’d told me from the beginning, ‘You’re lucky when you get thirty per cent into a finished script.’ On city politics in particular, I knew anything I wrote would be completely reworked by Simon and Zorzi—I had never researched that world and didn’t know anything about it. And, truthfully, I fought that thread—Carcetti, all that. I didn’t think anybody would want to see it, and I didn’t want to write it. But, in the end, I

think Simon was right. It made the show richer and gave a more balanced and panoramic view of the city. You just can't understand the streets without understanding politics."

David Simon was born in 1960, and brought up in a comfortable, book-filled house in Silver Spring. His father, Bernard Simon, was the public-relations director and the chief speechwriter for B'nai B'rith, and his mother, Dorothy Simon, was a homemaker who went back to college in her fifties and became a counsellor for runaway teens in McLean, Virginia. She attended the University of Maryland at the same time David did and graduated summa cum laude, whereas Simon, who was consumed by his work editing the college newspaper, was a C student. ("B-minus, maybe, but that would be generous," Simon said.) Simon's brother Gary, who is fourteen years older than David, is now the head of the infectious-diseases program at George Washington University Medical Center. His sister Linda, who was ten years older, was an abstract painter; she died of breast cancer in 1990. Laura Lippman, Simon's wife, says that her mother-in-law once told her that David was her most "interesting" child; one day, she came home and found him curled up in the dryer, laughing to himself.

At the dinner table, Gary Simon recalls, David was often privy to "political discussion at a level of exposure that wouldn't be typical for a six-year-old kid." The Simons were committed New Deal Democrats—Bernard Simon was a fervent supporter of Hubert Humphrey. Once, when the family arrived late for a Kol Nidre service and found the synagogue doors closed to stragglers, Bernard became so angry that he decided to found his own Saturday-morning service; it took place in another synagogue's basement. "There were always rabbis around," Gary says. "And a lot of discussion. David was an active participant in that as a kid." The family kept kosher, Gary says, "till one day a neighbor gave me a piece of bacon, and that was the end of that. Neither David nor I feel religious. I would say we feel traditional."

Reporting attracted Simon early on. Bernard Simon had started out as a journalist—before he went to work in public relations, he'd been the managing editor of the N.Y.U. student newspaper, and a stringer for the Hudson County *Dispatch*—and he had friends who were reporters. One was Irving Spiegel, who was known as Pat, because, as a religion reporter for the *Times*, he spent so much time in St. Patrick's Cathedral. Simon described Uncle Pat to me in an e-mail: "He could play concert piano, and composed verses of the 'Metropolitan Desk Opera,' a never-ending farce of the *Times* that he would perform at parties, goofing on co-workers and bosses. He could recite Shakespeare in Yiddish. He had a way of seizing the floor at parties and ranting comically at imagined affronts and outrages. As a young child, I thought he was typical of newspapermen in his élan and brass. I expected to meet lots of people like Uncle Pat. It was a different place and time, I guess. Between knowing Pat and my father taking me to see a revival of 'The Front Page' at Arena Stage when I was eleven or twelve, I was sold a bill of goods."

David Mills, now a television writer in Hollywood, worked with Simon on the *Diamondback*, the University of Maryland paper, and remembers that Simon produced great humor pieces. Mills said, "He had a full-blown writing personality as an undergraduate. He was always getting parking tickets, so he did these rambling, profane, angry pieces about the student ticketers, his nemeses." He continued, "Though people don't talk much about the humor in 'The Wire,' it's there. You drop somebody into an alien environment—a closed society like the homicide cops or the drug culture—and the key to working your way into that culture is to understand the jokes, which David does. It's crucial, because, if it weren't there, the work would be too depressing. It's crushing subject matter, but not necessarily to the cops—they're making jokes while they're looking at dead bodies—and not to the people shooting dope, even. They're not necessarily walking around saying, 'Woe is me.' There's a grim humor that springs out of that life."

In his senior year, Simon became the College Park stringer for the Baltimore *Sun*. He wrote so many stories that a shop steward complained he was violating the union contract; after he graduated, the *Sun* put him on staff full time. He was assigned to the police beat. Rebecca Corbett, the former *Sun* editor, told me that Simon "saw the cop beat as a whole window onto the sociology of the city, a way of examining the failings of government, a way to think about policy, especially drug policy, and a way of telling stories." She continued, "David would say that all he ever wanted to be was a reporter for the Baltimore *Sun*. It was his home. He was tremendous fun, because he was passionate. He always wrote too long; he could be pigheaded; he was a deadline pusher. And he got into all kinds of labor stuff at the paper. At one point, I told him that he could not circulate another memo until I'd seen it."

Simon wrote about how the interplay of cocaine and semi-automatic weapons jacked up the city's murder rate; he wrote about the homicide unit on Christmas—"which seemed ironical enough to my twenty-five-year-old sensibilities," he said. And he wrote an obituary of a police informant with a photographic memory and a talent for ruses, who became the basis of the character Bubbles on "The Wire." Occasionally, he published articles that strained for literary effect—such as an extended comparison of a convicted drug dealer and Shakespeare's Richard III. But even as "Homicide" and "The Corner" were published to excellent reviews, he continued to write standard newspaper fare—"F.B.I. NOW MONITORING STATE PROBE OF HAGERSTOWN PRISON RIOT," "MURDER SUSPECT, STOPPED FOR SPEEDING, WAS FREED."

After years of reporting in Baltimore's ghettos, he found himself at ease with being the only white person in a room, or the only person in the room who didn't know how to re-vial drugs, and found, too, that he could channel the voices of people in the game. "To be a decent city reporter, I had to listen to people who were different from me," Simon explained. "I had to not be

uncomfortable asking stupid questions or being on the outside. I found I had a knack for walking into situations where I didn't know anything, and just waiting. A lot of reporters don't want to be the butt of jokes. But sometimes it's useful to act as if you couldn't find your ass with both hands."

Along the way, Simon grew deeply attached to his adopted city, Baltimore—or Bodymore, Murdaland, as the graffiti in the title sequence of "The Wire" has it. Rafael Alvarez, the *Sun* colleague who became a "Wire" writer, told me that when he and Simon worked together they liked to "hang out at 3 A.M. at the end of Clinton Street, drinking cheap beer, maybe whiskey. You know those scenes of McNulty and his partner drinking at the railroad tracks? That's basically what we were doing. There were old warehouses and scores of feral cats. We'd sort of stare across the harbor at Fort McHenry, talking about the city we both loved." Simon and Alvarez were both connoisseurs of the Baltimore vernacular, and some of the sayings that Alvarez learned from his father, a merchant marine, made it into the scripts. If you were crazy, you were "half goofy," and if you were drunk you were "half in the bag" or had "half a load on." ("Why half? I always wondered," Alvarez said.) If you lost your job or died, you were "finished with engines." Simon relished Alvarez's eye for Baltimore detail, and let him indulge it in his work for "The Wire." In one script that Alvarez wrote, there's a scene in the office of the union boss in which a dartboard hanging on the wall features a photograph of Robert Irsay, the owner of the Baltimore Colts, who, in 1984, took the team to Indianapolis. "Simon and I are the kind of guys who, when we see those horseshoes with the word 'Indianapolis' on them, we want to throw up," Alvarez said.

Alvarez noted of Simon, "He could have been out there in L.A. years ago, writing scripts." But Simon never considered leaving. It helped that Laura Lippman, Simon's third wife—whom he began dating in 2000 and married last year—was a Baltimore girl, whose mystery novels were set in the city, and who had no intention of leaving it. And it helped, too, that his second wife, a graphic artist to whom he's still close, and with whom he shares custody of the couple's thirteen-year-old son, Ethan, lived just outside the city. (Once, when I was visiting the tall, narrow Baltimore row house where Simon and Lippman live—Simon also owns and writes in the place next door—I noticed a menorah that Ethan had made for them, in which the candleholders were tiny handcrafted facsimiles of the books they'd published.)

In the early nineties, the *Sun* came under new leadership, and Simon's "Front Page" fantasy sputtered out. The Times Mirror Company, which had bought the paper in 1986, brought in a new editor, John Carroll, and a new managing editor, William Marimow, both veterans of the Philadelphia *Inquirer*, and both with fine reputations as newsmen. "When the boys from Philly showed up, they arrived with a mythology that they had the keys to the kingdom and they were gonna show us how to do journalism," Simon said. "But to my great surprise—because their reps preceded them—they were tone-deaf and prize-hungry and more interested in self-aggrandizement than in building lasting quality at the paper."

Simon liked the new regime even less when it began thinning out the staff with buyouts. It was only the beginning of an era in which newspaper readerships and budgets got smaller. In 2000, the Times Mirror Company was itself bought by the Tribune Company. And when John Carroll later quit the editorship of the Los Angeles *Times*, rather than institute cutbacks, he became a hero to many newspaper reporters.

Though Simon took the *Sun's* second buyout offer, he still misses breaking news, his wife says. As he once wrote in an essay, he "had long imagined" himself "bumming cigarettes from younger reporters in exchange for back-in-the-day stories about what it was like to work with Mencken and Manchester." For a man who has been as successful as he has in a new career, his anger hasn't abated much toward the forces that, as he sees it, drove him out of journalism. The flip side of his loyalty—he is the kind of guy who will take off work to attend a funeral for the ninety-something mother of a retired rewrite man he used to work with at the *Sun*—is his tendency to hold a grudge. In April, on a Baltimore public radio show, Simon remarked that he still remembers the name of the girl who wouldn't kiss him in grade school when they were playing Spin the Bottle, and of the pasteup guy who, back in 1985, excised the last precious paragraph of one of his stories. He went on, "Anything I've ever done in life, down to cleaning up my room, has been accomplished because I was going to show people that they were fucked up and wrong and that I was the fucking center of the universe." It was a joke, but not entirely. Evidence of Simon's feuds often ends up on "The Wire." In the fourth season, Simon introduced a highly unpleasant supervisor of the major-crimes unit—someone who is more than willing to close down any investigations that might embarrass politicians, and of whom a sergeant says, "He doesn't cast off talent lightly. He heaves it away with great force." His name is Marimow.

The real William Marimow, who is now the editor of the Philadelphia *Inquirer*, says that he's baffled and dismayed by Simon's "obsession" with what went on at the *Sun*:

"He is as monomaniacal as Captain Ahab pursuing the white whale." Marimow says that the *Sun* made great strides in narrative and in-depth journalism—and was acknowledged for doing so in the *Columbia Journalism Review* and other publications—during the same years that Simon "claims we were destroying it." He recalls only two conflicts with Simon: one over a raise that Simon wanted, and one over an article that Simon wrote about "metalmen"—people who strip houses of copper piping and sell it. Marimow didn't like Simon's use of the word "harvesters" to describe "people who were destroying homes. I thought it glorified

them. He disagreed.” Now, Marimow says, “it’s this drumbeat, year after year, of rewriting history.”

Carroll, for his part, said that when he became editor the *Sun* was a “fallen angel” that had enjoyed “its journalistic peak in the nineteen-twenties and thirties. . . . Among newspaper journalists elsewhere, the *Sun* was regarded as uninspired and underperforming. It clearly needed work.” He said, “Were we prize-hungry? I’d be thrilled to accept a Pulitzer. Wouldn’t you?” He went on, “David considers himself the ultimate police reporter, and he disdains anyone else who succeeds at it. Bill Marimow won two Pulitzers as a police reporter; David won zero. One doesn’t need a degree in psychology to understand why David is so enraged about both Bill and the Pulitzers.”

Simon’s television career has been less acrimonious. In 1991, the director Barry Levinson optioned Simon’s book “Homicide” for a television series. Simon was happy to receive a check, and hoped that the show would lead to more sales of his book, but he didn’t think it would change his life all that much. Then the show’s producers suggested that Simon try writing a script. Simon called up David Mills, his old *Diamondback* colleague, who was now working as a reporter at the *Washington Post*. Neither Mills nor Simon had ever written a script. But Simon has proved remarkably good at identifying friends and associates who could make a major life transition—from journalism to screenwriting, from crime to acting, from police work to television production. Mills says of Simon, “He brought me on for a lark, and it changed my life.” The two men wrote a script about a tourist whose wife is killed in front of him and their young children. Tom Fontana, one of the producers, considered it too dark, and held on to it until the second season of “Homicide,” when Robin Williams agreed to guest star. The script won a Writers Guild Award. Mills recalls, “I jumped all over that. I got an agent, I moved out here to L.A. I was, like, ‘David, a door has opened for us.’ I got on ‘N.Y.P.D. Blue’ and I kept trying to tell him, ‘There’s money to be made out here.’ But he’s a newspaper guy in a way I never was.” Eventually, though, Simon did immerse himself fully in television. He became a producer on “Homicide,” and spent years learning from Fontana—how to write scripts, how to cast actors, how to be a useful presence on the set. It was worth it, Fontana told him: “You become a producer to protect your writing.”

Last November, Simon and his wife travelled to New Orleans. On a chilly Sunday morning, they walked up Louisa Street, in the Ninth Ward, with the Nine Times Social and Pleasure Club parade. The Nine Times is a “second-line club”—part of the New Orleans tradition of honoring people who have recently died with a high-stepping, glitzyly costumed procession, accompanied by brass bands. It emerged in the post-Reconstruction period, when African-Americans couldn’t get burial insurance but wanted their friends and neighbors to pass on in style. This particular club was made up of people who lived in a Ninth Ward housing project called the Desire, which had been torn down. The day’s parade was a sendoff for a Mr. Hollis Magee and a Mr. Donald (Pig) Green, and it proceeded boldly across a freeway overpass to Desire Street and, ultimately, to Piety Street. Simon was visiting because the next series he hopes to do for HBO is set in New Orleans—he loves the city, and wanted to use it as a setting even before the storm, though he certainly does not know it as well as he knows Baltimore. He was doing the kind of hangingout research that he used to do as a reporter: listening to how people talk, picking up phrases and perspectives on the world.

The series will focus on New Orleans’s music community, and Simon plans to base some of the main characters on real people: a jazz trumpeter named Kermit Ruffins, who plays with a band called the Barbecue Swingers; Donald Harrison, Jr., a musician who is also the chief of an Indian tribe that performs at Mardi Gras; and Davis Rogan, a local d.j. and piano player. Rogan was at the parade—Simon had picked him up earlier at his house, whose decrepit interior had more shades of paint than I had ever seen in any dwelling. Rogan is a tall, shambling guy with unruly sandy hair and a soul patch. He seemed to know every musician in New Orleans, and perhaps two-thirds of the people at the parade. He teaches music in the New Orleans schools, and he once ran for state representative on a platform of legalizing marijuana and using the revenues to fix the city’s streets—“Pot for potholes!” was his slogan.

Simon had tracked Rogan down in France, where he’d been some sort of artist-in-residence at an abbey. “I was in the Loire Valley, surrounded by very rich old people, most of whom had been dead a thousand years—Eleanor of Aquitaine, people like that,” Rogan recalled. “And French people kept asking me, ‘Is New Orleans dead?’ ‘No, you fucking idiot!’ ” He spoke good-humoredly over the parade musicians, who were playing “It’s All Over Now.” He said of the city, “It is what it is now.”

We walked over washboard streets, past boarded-up houses with desiccated spider plants hanging from the porch ceilings. A large dead gull lay in the street. Many of the houses were still spray-painted with messages indicating the number of live or dead people inside. Some had messages about animals, which Rogan found objectionable: “How’d you like it if your house was spray-painted in big black letters with something about a pit bull? Why didn’t they take it all the way—spray-paint, you know, ‘Rat in back!’ ”

Simon said he had heard that some of the housing projects hadn’t been reopened yet, though they could, with some cleaning up, be viable places to live.

“Yeah, they’re going for a scattered-site housing plan now,” Rogan said.

“Really scattered,” Simon said. “Like, from Houston to Atlanta.”

It was a blue-sky day, and the nip in the air was just enough to wake up a musician who’d played a late-night gig. A woman in a

black puffy jacket and ankle-strap stilettos drank Sutter Hill wine through a straw, while a white hipster girl in her twenties banged on a Little Tikes drum. Another woman stood over a man who was lying on the ground; both of them laughed as she joked, “I’m gonna whip your ass!” People were smoking cigars, taking photos with their cell phones, dancing to the music. Somebody was selling two things—Jack Daniel’s and candied apples—from the back of a truck. Simon looked around quietly, taking it in, though every once in a while he hummed along to the music or asked Rogan a question. Simon wore slightly baggy jeans, one of his porkpie hats, shades, and a black fleece jacket. He wasn’t being secretive about his information-gathering, but he was being low-key. As he told me later, “It was too early in the process to have politicians or community leaders, or all the people looking to get on some Hollywood tit, trying to bum-rush this thing. There’s a time and a place for that down the road, if this thing gets any kind of green light, but now it’s just about getting comfortable with these voices and this world, and writing a good pilot and first-season bible. If I screw that up, it ends right there.”

Musicians, Simon complained, were harder to pin down for meetings than drug dealers. He decided that it was better to attend gigs and approach them between sets. That evening, we went to a club, Jin Jean’s, to watch Kermit Ruffins play. Sipping a vodka-and-cranberry, Simon explained, “I’m listening now for how they use a phrase or tell a story. Like, I’ve asked musicians, What do you say when you hit a bad note? They said they call it a ‘clam.’ I was, like, Really? I called it that in my high-school jazz band thirty years ago.”

Compared to “The Wire,” he said, the New Orleans project will have to be “a smaller, more intimate story about musicians reconstituting their lives.” Simon is planning to work with Eric Overmyer, a writer who lives part time in the city. “New Orleans is a place where even nuances have nuances,” he said. “It has an incredibly ornate oral tradition.”

Simon said that he was eager to explore his love of music on the new show. The singer-songwriter Steve Earle, a friend of Simon’s, says, “David is a music freak.” The two men met after Simon cast Earle in “The Wire,” as a scruffy twelve-step drug counsellor named Walon. For “The Wire,” Simon did not want music perpetually in the background; it had to come from something visible in a scene, like a boom box or a car with open windows. There were two exceptions: every season ends with a montage accompanied by a song, and the opening credits feature “Way Down in the Hole,” a twisted gospel song written by Tom Waits. Simon’s search for the right opening song was intense. He went through his record collection—which runs to Woody Guthrie, the Pogues, Muddy Waters, jazz, and R. & B., including New Orleans groups like the Meters—looking for something that would imply “misplaced faith in the postmodern, post-industrial gods. Obviously, given that order, there was not a lot that worked.” Waits’s song fit this high-flown criterion, but Simon felt that his “white man’s growl” wasn’t right for the first season, which was so deeply rooted in black West Baltimore. So he decided to use a cover version by the Blind Boys of Alabama. For the next season, set at the port, where many of the main characters were white union guys, he returned to the Waits original, and then he decided to change the interpretation every season, to reflect the shifting focus of the show. The fourth season, with its schools story line, featured a version by a Baltimore boys’ choir. This year, it will be Steve Earle, whose bottomed-out voice suits the homeless theme.

The day after the parade, Simon took a drive around New Orleans. He said, “This show will be a way of making a visual argument that cities matter. ‘The Wire’ has not really done that. I certainly never said or wanted to say that Baltimore is not worth saving, or that it can’t be saved. But I think some people watching the show think, Why don’t they just move away?” Indeed, the City Council of Baltimore once nearly passed a resolution that proposed steps to counter the bad image of Baltimore propagated by “The Wire.” In 2005, the *Sun*

quoted a report by an image-consulting company that the city had hired. “Baltimore is plagued by negative press and harmful characterizations in the media, resulting in an inferiority complex,” it said. “The perception of Baltimore is ‘The Wire,’ ‘The Corner,’ ‘Homicide’ . . . a hopeless, depressed, unemployed, crackaddicted city.” And, under the headline “NO WAY TO TREAT A TOWN,” a reviewer for the *New York Post* quipped, “I don’t know this Simon guy, but he doesn’t seem to like Baltimore very much, although he makes a very good living writing about it.”

Simon discounts such criticism, but he acknowledged, “On ‘The Wire,’ we’ve been so angry about what’s been mangled in public policy, and what’s at stake, that we really didn’t have time to celebrate what the city can be.” A goal of the new series, he thinks, will be to make a case for the glories of the American city—“why we need to accept ourselves as an urban people.” And, to his mind, it doesn’t get any better than New Orleans. “At the Macy’s parade, when they show New York, they gotta get the dancers from Broadway shows out in the streets doing a kick line,” he said. “In New Orleans the musicians are already in the streets.”

Not long ago, Simon pulled off a coup that only he could have. It combined his media savvy, his loyalty to the people he’s written about, and his commitment to changing the way the underclass is represented. In “The Corner,” Simon and Burns had written extensively about a woman named Fran Boyd, a smart, likable person who had a devastating addiction to heroin, and whose first husband eventually died of his addiction. After Simon and Burns finished reporting the book, they introduced her to a man named Donnie Andrews, who was serving time for murder. Like the character Omar in “The Wire,” Andrews had robbed drug dealers at gunpoint. Eventually, he killed one.

Andrews had turned himself in to Burns, and Simon had written about him. Burns sensed that he was somebody who could

support Boyd in her flickering hope of getting off heroin for good. As Burns told her, “You think you know it all? Well, I’ve got someone for you.” After Burns gave Boyd’s phone number to Andrews, the two began talking for hours on the phone every week, and Andrews, a former heroin user himself, persuaded her to change. For twenty-eight harrowing days in the Baltimore Recovery Center, she got detoxed, and, over the next twelve years, she became a drug counsellor for recovering addicts, a far better mother to her two sons, and a guardian for two nieces and a nephew, all while lobbying to get Andrews released. She and Andrews fell in love. In April, 2005, after seventeen years in federal prison in Phoenix, Arizona, Andrews was freed. The two made plans to marry in Baltimore, in August of this year.

Since Boyd and Simon first met, they had become close friends. In fact, she and both of her sons played small parts on “The Wire”; her younger son even became an assistant film editor on the show. When Simon heard about Boyd’s engagement, he jumped into action.

In recent years, Simon had become an unlikely fan of the “Vows” column in the *Times*—the Sunday feature in which a couple’s wedding is described in detail. Wouldn’t it make a statement, he thought, if Fran and Donnie’s wedding was covered by “Vows”? Usually, the couples were privileged: Ivy League graduates in Vera Wang dresses and Armani tuxes. Simon called up one of the “Vows” editors, introduced himself, and made his pitch. When the editor called back to say she liked the idea, she told him that the paper wanted to do a feature article about Boyd and Andrews as well. A few weeks later, the editor told Simon via e-mail that the “Vows” column had been cancelled. That made him mad. “Having Fran and Donnie in the ‘Vows’ section was inclusive and smart, an unspoken triumph for the N.Y.T. itself—a democratization,” he explained to me in an e-mail. “To do a feature was far less so—in fact, it was the opposite, in a way. As if such a marriage were grist for a news feature but unsuitable to be considered among other romances.”

So Simon called Bill Keller, the editor of the *Times*, and made his pitch again. Are you saying, Keller asked, that you’d rather have the “Vows” piece than a front-page feature? Yes, Simon told him, strange though it might seem. Keller said that he’d have to think about it and call him back; he was a fan of “The Wire,” but this decision would have to be made on its merits. In the end, he called Simon and said that he’d read the feature and it made him want to go to Fran and Donnie’s wedding. The feature ran—on the front page of the August 9th edition.

The “Vows” column ran on August 19th. It said that Boyd and Andrews were married at a catering hall in Baltimore, by the pastor of the A.M.E. church where Andrews is now head of security and does anti-gang outreach work. According to the *Times*, the bride wore a strapless, beaded wedding dress. The groom wore a black tuxedo with a pink tie. They marched down the aisle to the accompaniment of a Luther Vandross song, “Here and Now.” The guests included the actors Dominic West, Sonja Sohn, and Andre Royo from “The Wire.” David Simon was the best man. ♦

ILLUSTRATION: STEVE BRODNER
