

# Actor Michael K. Williams, known for his role in *The Wire*, dies at 54

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Michael K. Williams, the actor best known for his role as Omar Little in the HBO series *The Wire*, died last Monday. The talented performer, found dead in his Brooklyn, New York apartment by his nephew, was only 54.

While an official cause of death has not yet been determined, it is suspected that he died of a drug overdose, according to investigators.

Michael Williams' most iconic role was that of Omar Little, the gay anti-hero character in David Simon's *The Wire* (2002-2008), a five-season, 60-episode HBO series that was critically acclaimed. *The Wire* was set in Baltimore and explored the terrible social conditions that plagued the city.

Williams was born in Brooklyn, the child of an immigrant mother from the Bahamas and a father raised in South Carolina. Williams grew up in the impoverished and crowded Vanderveer projects in East Flatbush. He told the *New York Times* a few years ago, "Vanderveer is 59 buildings, six floors high, with seven apartments on each level. There are so many people here — beautiful and beautifully flawed people — and I want all of their stories to be told."

Undoubtedly Williams drew inspiration from his own life for his work in *The Wire*, and his brilliant performance as Omar is loved by audiences of the series. The show probed a number of themes, including police and political corruption, drug violence, poverty, the conditions of port workers, the crisis facing public education, homelessness, surveillance, journalism and more.

*The Wire* was at its strongest when it treated issues facing the "lower depths," as well as the massive, built-in corruption of the political order in Baltimore (run by Democrats), a microcosm of the wider social and political situation in America. One of the great

strengths of the series was simply the large number of inner-city and working class personalities it brought before a viewing audience, the type of human being rarely seen or considered on American television.

At the same time, the show was limited by its police-centric framework, too often wallowing in the world of cops and drug gangsters, as though that was all there was to a city like Baltimore, once a major industrial center. The bleakness and the absence of a broader picture helped to create the impression that the social order was fundamentally unchangeable.

Michael Williams' character of Omar appears throughout the series, but his role as a moral anti-hero who holds up gangsters had problematic aspects to it, despite Williams' exceptional performance.

*The Wire* was unusual and intriguing, especially in its earlier seasons, and ushered in an era of more serious work on US television. Simon is certainly one of the more productive and thoughtful television writers and producers of the past two decades (*Generation Kill*, *Treme*, *The Deuce*, *The Plot Against America*).

In regard to Simon and Ed Burns, the *Wire*'s co-creator and a former Baltimore policeman and teacher, the *World Socialist Web Site* noted in a generally positive review of *The Plot Against America* that there was no reason "to close one's eyes to the serious limitations of their outlook, associated with liberal and Democratic Party circles, and its consequences for their artistic work." Simon was a supporter of Barack Obama and spoke with him about *The Wire* in 2015 at the White House, months after the brutal crackdown on protests in Ferguson, Missouri against police murder.

On Sunday, Simon penned a moving tribute to Williams for the *New York Times* ("The Question Michael K. Williams Asked Me Before Every Season of 'The Wire'"), in which he stressed some of the

actor's considerable strengths. To Simon's credit, he explains that he pushed back against the argument that the show should center around primarily the black working class. Simon persuaded Williams before the series' second season that, "We want to have a bigger argument about what has gone wrong. Not just in Baltimore, but elsewhere, too."

Simon notes that he insisted to Williams that "we also make clear going forward that the drug culture is not a racial pathology, it's about economics and the collapse of the working class—Black and white both."

He added, "I came to trust Mike to speak publicly to our drama and its purposes, to take personal pride in all that we were trying, however improbably, to build. He became increasingly political as the show aged, and in interviews took to addressing societal and political issues, his arguments ranging well beyond Omar's arc."

It's clear that Williams' work with Simon affected the former significantly. Williams publicly opposed mass incarceration, police brutality and more. The *Times* and other media outlets, however, have tried to paint a picture of Williams as focused on race.

In a 2017 interview with *Time* magazine about his role in *The Night Of*, Williams made his viewpoint clear. "In my perspective," he told *Time*, "the show has very little to do with race, and everything to do with class. I've come to realize that the race thing is a smoke screen. The real war is a war on class. It's about how much green you have in your pocket. In this country, you can unfortunately literally get away with murder if you have enough political background behind you. You are innocent until proven poor."

Williams had a number of important roles after *The Wire*, including as the bootlegger Chalky White in *Boardwalk Empire* and as Montrose Freeman in *Lovecraft Country*. He did a fine job as the grieving father of Bobby McCray in the powerful Netflix series "When They See Us," about a group of black youth known as the Central Park Five who were falsely accused of rape and attempted murder of a white woman. Prior to *The Wire*, Williams also played roles in Martin Scorsese's *Bringing Out The Dead* (1999) and *The Sopranos*.

Williams was a sensitive and insightful actor whose outlook and social awareness developed over time. The roles he took would weigh heavily on him, especially

the one in the *The Wire*. To play Omar, he apparently adopted a gangster lifestyle and began to abuse cocaine, which would have devastating consequences. His drug addiction left him destitute at various points.

A remarkable actor and thoughtful person, Michael K. Williams' death at such an early age is a tragic loss.



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