

[Intro music]

Koen: Hey everybody welcome to "Quote Me" episode four. I'm Koen.

John: I'm John.

Anna: I'm Anna.

Ian: I'm Ian.

K. And today we are talking about comic book legend Dwayne McDuffie [music, "I put a shock to your system: Static Shock!"] John, tell us.

J. Can do Koen. On today's episode of Quote me as Koen said, we are going to be discussing the life and achievements of Dwayne McDuffie, a powerful voice in the world of comics and animation. Dwayne was born on February 20th 1962 to Leroy and Edna Hawkins-McDuffie. McDuffie had three siblings: an elder brother named Bryan and a younger brother named Daryl who pre-deceased him. He also has another half-sibling, comedian and actor Keegan Michael Key through his father. Dwayne considered himself a "proto-nerd" and attended Roper, a local school for gifted children. He attended Michigan University at the age of 13. After high school he returned to Michigan and majored in English and Physics. He graduated in 1983 and then, growing disillusioned with his career path, and how his scientific work was being used, stepped away from science and drifted for a year. After that directionless year, he enrolled in film school at NYU. In 1984, after enrolling in NYU, Dwayne became friends with Greg Wright who worked at Marvel. Greg helped Dwayne get an interview with Marvel which led to his employment with the company and began the writing career that would go on to touch so many people in so many various mediums and forms. Okay, so to start things out with Dwayne's writing career we're going to talk about the Marvel years. After Greg Wright got Dwayne a job at Marvel, Dwayne was working in the office, he was trying out a lot of pitches and for some reason there was an editor working with Marvel at the time who just had it out for Dwayne. Anytime Dwayne would submit a pitch, he would shoot it down and it just wouldn't happen. Dwayne was having to, like, go around this guy and work with other people under the guy's notice and try to get pitches in and this finally culminated in Dwayne's first major work as a writer which was the comic series "Damage Control." Are you guys all familiar with that one.

I. Yes

A. Yes

K. I think a lot of people will know "Damage Control" from, there was a, there was a joke about it in one of the recent Marvel movies wasn't there?

J. So, really really cool. For those of you keeping score at home, John is a major comic book fan.

[all laughter]

J. Animation, the books, the movies...

I. Understatement

J. The whole thing, and “Damage Control” actually was introduced into the Marvel Cinematic Universe in “Spiderman: Homecoming.” It was set after the battle of New York in the prologue sequence which is when The Avengers first formed in the movie continuity, and “Damage Control” was set up to clean up the messes from the battles between superheroes, supervillains, alien invasions, all that stuff, and that was largely carried over from the comics which was Dwayne’s original premise. He set it up so that he could use it to kind of like, critique superhero comics, like what is the realistic fallout of, like these mythical-like godlike beings like clashing in the street, how does that affect everyday folks just trying to commute around New York City and...

K. Sorry didn’t mean to [laugh] interrupt you...

J. No, no no go ahead...

K. This is so important to me because I always get, like, secondhand embarrassment from like movies when they, like, destroy everything and I’m like “who’s going to pay for that.”

I. That’s Damage Control

A. Damage Control

[all laugh]

A. Damage Control

K. Damage Control, so

J. It happens so much and especially in Homecoming you like see throughout like he like smuggles onto like a Damage Control truck that’s going to a depot to Washington...

K. Really

J. ...and it’s got like all these like pieces from battles in other movies there’s like a head from an Ultron robot from one of the Avengers movies, they’re constantly referencing these different battles--one person had like retrofitted gear from crossbones and Captain America: Civil Wars. It was a comic book fan’s dream, just an easter egg-stravaganza, if you will

K. Nice

I. That's awesome

K. nice nice

J. And this was kind of like Dwayne's first real attempt to kind of get in there and sort of ground comics in a way that was realistic and that wasn't really being explored. And we're going to see that the more that we talk that Dwayne was really trying to humanize these like larger-than-life stories in his, in his fiction and we'll see that over the arc of things and Damage Control was a good introduction point for that.

K. And then his next big work at Marvel was Deathlok right?

J. That's right: The Souls of Cyberfolk was the overarching name of that particular arc.

K. Yes, and it took some arguing to get that name through because it was a reference to W.E.B. Dubois "The Souls of Black Folk," and a lot of people didn't get that reference so they were like "this name is too clunky, it's too long, no one's going to, you know, comic books are supposed to be smart, snippy, quick, and he's like "no, no, hear me out, the whole idea of Deathlok is this sort of double reality that he has to face. I do have a quote here, it's a little bit long, but it's from "The Souls of Black Folk" and I think it really encompasses the ideas that Dwayne was trying to get across, so let me go ahead and read this: "...After the Egyptian and the Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and the Mongolian, the Black person is a sort of 7th son, born with a veil and gifted with 2nd sight in this American world, a world which yields him no true self-consciousness but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul through the tape of the world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his Two-ness, an American, a Black Person, two souls two thoughts two unreconcilable strivings two warring ideals in one dark body whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder." I think this is super-important because it talks a lot about this character as, remind me, is Deathlok, is he the cyborg-guy?

J. Deathlok is the cyborg-guy

K. Okay [laughter]

J. No, we're going to be talking about a lot of varied like characters across the sci-fi, superhero, fantasy spectrum in today's episode...

K. Right, a lot of characters, but Deathlok he as making a lot of machinery without really realizing what it was for...

J. mmm-hmm

K. and then he eventually realized that they were using it to, was it for war?

I. Weapons

K. Weapons

J. Yes, weapons development, and for those of you who may not be familiar, Deathlok isn't the most well-known character [time stamp 7:25] they actually did like a version of him on "Agents of SHIELD" during its first season...

K. Oh yeah?

J. But, again, if you haven't seen that, I mean, he's not really a character that pops up in the adaptations outside of comics quite that often.

K. Right, but the whole point of this character is that he was a good man and when he realized what he was doing was hurting people, he was like "I want out" and they ended up, like, tricking him and like he became his own machinery, like he turned into a cyborg...

J. He's this Terminator kind of like character...

K. Yeah...

I. Very similar to Iron Man

K. Yeah...

J. Yeah...

I. Like with Stark Industries...

K. So, so now he's like, he's very, he doesn't want to fight he doesn't want to hurt people and now he's like forced to be, forced into this body that is like meant to hurt people and so his Two-ness is that he's very much a pacifist and now he's been put into a war machine...

J. And that's a little bit of Dwayne himself coming out in the character. Dwayne was like an avid pacifist, a big important part of who he was as a person, and I don't think we've like said it out loud yet, but just to fully disclaim Dwayne McDuffie was in fact a Black man, the Black man's experience in America and the history of their struggle is a big part of his writing and what he tries to get across in things and we're going to see that repeat a lot throughout the course of the episode today.

A. Well, that's one of the things I was going to point out is that, I remember reading an interview where McDuffie said he put a lot of himself into Deathlok in that kind of sense like he didn't realize that what he was doing was harmful, like when he was being forced into writing like white characters that fit with the mainstream, especially at that time, being forced into that box because every idea he has is shut down, but he's leagues above his co-writers in terms of talent which we will get into, to see that kind of like dichotomy of Black excellence and being held back

J. 100%, and we sort of touched on it in the intro, and I'll say it again, Dwayne was taking college courses at the age of 13...

K. I've actually seen two different things: one said 13 and one said 10, so I'm not entirely sure what is the correct age, the point is is that he was in college as a child [laughs]...

J. Yes...

A. As a physics major which I couldn't...

K. Yeah...

A. Do now

K. No...

[laughter]

J. No, no no

[general laughter]

I. Not at all...

J. Dwayne was a brilliant man...

I. He really was...

K. I think there was more to, I think there was more to Deathlok, I think there was actually an experience that McDuffie had where he was doing something very similar, where he was making something with, doing something with physics so then they stole his ideas...

I. Yeah...

J. He was...

I. thermal?

J. Thermal couplings...

I. Yes...

K. Oh yeah...

J. He was majoring in English and physics and he got his degrees he graduated he was working on this research and they were actually using the guidance system for missiles...

I. Yep

A. Wow

J. And that's why he became super-disillusioned and we're actually going to see that play out in our next segment as well, there's going to be another character where he like sort of like tackles similar themes to Deathlok. I'll save that little bit for that section but it's super conflicted with his pacifist ideals and you can really see him starting to like take a crack at that through fiction and Deathlok trying to sort through it...

K. And Deathlok also was inspired by The Thing...

J. Yes...

K. In Fantastic Four which is actually one of McDuffie's favorite comics, umm and what he has to say about this character archetype is that "...it is a man alienated by his surface appearance," umm and so he's taking this, and I quote, "grim and gritty hero" and like doing his sort of take on it, umm, but when he, he does this with all of his heroes, all of his characters, is he tries to make someone who is a part of himself so that he can, like, make the better version of himself...

J. That's right...

K. So this character in particular was really important to him because he felt like this character was morally superior to himself...

J. Right, that ultimate idealized...

K. Yes...

J. Optimum man sort of thing,

K. Yes...

A. And that's one of the things that like, contrary to the thing where it's that idealized person whose ostracized because what they look like, umm, one of the things that was brought up about Deathlok is that, this is a flawed character...

K. Yeah...

A. He's not just, he's not going to be a model minority, umm like stereotype...

J. Right...

A. It's going to be a realistic description, I guess representation of what a person actually is because like that is another thing Mcduffie tried to fight was having like "The Quirky Sidekick" or like "The Brain" and not allowing the Black characters to just exist as people would...

K. Well I think, yes that, but he was also very particular about making characters very humanized...

A. Yeah...

K. like he was like he doesn't like stereotypes at all he doesn't like these sort of umm the archetypes of his time he was very much like "we need to make characters that are relatable and interesting and unique and that's partially what we are going to talk about later on when he works on "Justice League" is that he took this show where it was like all of these characters, this very large cast where anyone could have said any of the lines, and made it so that they all had very unique voices...

A. Mmm-hmm

K. and that's something that carries, that he carries throughout all of his career, is that he's very invested in the characters themselves.

I. Yeah, for sure.

J. That's right, it's definitely about the character development, and one thing I would like to say while we're kind of talking about this just to get to the politics between Marvel and DC...

K. Oh boy...

[Laughter]

J. But it does loop back in, this is done with purpose, I promise, it's not just me like *ad naseum* going on about comics, so, the idea behind Marvel when Stan Lee and Jack Kirby started creating this interconnected universe, is that Marvel could be the world outside your window. DC Comics, the Distinguished Competition is what they called them you know, [laughter] as an aside, they're sort of like these God-like figures they're like perfect, they're like these paragons like Koen would say later on when they are working on Justice League it's like all the characters could say the same line and it wouldn't sound out of character, its just powers and costumes

because they're all so perfect, Jack [Kirby] and Stan [Lee]'s idea with the Marvel Universe was to like depict these really flawed human beings with superpowers and showing them grappling with it and struggling with it.

A. Yeah.

J. It seem, based on our research [Time 14:09] Dwayne was a really big Marvel comics fan, I think he was a big comics fan in general, but he really responded to Don McGregor's "Black Panther" run, "Black Panther" was the 1st Black superhero in comics. He was introduced during "Fantastic Four," when Jack Kirby and Stan Lee first started the book. Dwayne was also a super-literary guy, so he's like taking that very literary mind and it's interest in comics and taking Deathlok and making this very Marvel-styled character...

K. Yeah...

J. who is very flawed, very troubled, but also like making him a Black character which there was a shortage of in comics. Comics has been a mostly white medium for most of its existence so, here in his early part of his career he's starting to try an address that and to create these interesting characters who are Black or BIPOC but who aren't necessarily super-reflective of all Black people which as Anna said is something he would go on to try and combat his entire career in writing.

K. Yeah, something he said was like "when you have a world full of white characters then no single character will represent the entirety of white people, but when you have one single, or like, a handful of BIPOC and Black characters then that character becomes like the voice of the people..."

J. Right...

K. Which is how we create these stereotypes and we create characters that, kind of suck.

[laugh]

A. Yeah...

J. Mmm-hmm...

K. So what he really wanted to do was just create a world that was more reflective of our own.

I. And because of this he was not a fan of Luke Cage, because of the stereotypes

K. And its original blaxploitation roots...

I. Exactly...

A. Yeah...

I. Yeah...

J. Umm, later on, once Milestone starts he actually parodies Luke Cage in an issue of Icon [laughter] with a character called Buck T. Wild, Mercenary Man [laughter]

K. Buck T. Wild...

J. If you look at the artwork, it's very clearly a Luke Cage parody...

K. Oh, I love it...

J. He's got the bright yellow outfit and the umm...[laughter] it's really something. Dwayne did not care for Luke Cage at all.

K. No, no...

A. Dwayne did kind of have like a sense of humor to, that's what drove...

K. he was so funny...

A. a lot of his progress and I think Ian has a letter that he...

K. One of his most...

A. Wrote to Marvel...

K. His most famous examples of him being sassy with his employer...

A. Yeah...

J. To tee this up for Ian, as we've said before, Dwayne was like constantly butting up against editorial. Once he actually got a voice and was writing he was actively speaking out about some of the ways people of color were portrayed in Marvel and like trying to dispel some of those stereotypes and this letter was written to Marvel's editorial board, so if you'd like to go...

I. Sure...

J. Ahead...

I. Umm, we can cut it, but we're not saying the title, correct? Just skip the title...

K. Right, just say it was a, umm, it was uhh...

J. A satirical pitch for a...

K. There we go, thank you...

J. for a new ongoing...

K. Satirical pitch...

J. series...

I. Okay, so this was a satirical pitch for a new ongoing series. It was drafted December 13th, 1989 and he wrote to his executives: "In the past year 25% of all African-American superheroes appearing in the Marvel Universe possess skateboard-based superpowers. In an attempt to remain on the cutting edge of comics, I hereby propose a new series that will fully exploit this exciting new trend. When a group of teenaged Black men find cosmic powered skateboards, their lives are forever changed: a team of distinct characters joins together swearing an oath to use their powers for good: Rocket Racer--a Black guy on a skateboard, Night Thrasher--a Black guy on a skateboard, Dark Wheelie—a Black guy on a skateboard, and their leader, the mysterious Black guy on a skateboard known only as—That Mysterious Black Guy on a Skateboard [laughter]. This is a surefire hit as it contains all these popular elements: circa 1974 clothing and hairstyles, bizarre speech patterns unrecognizable by any member of any culture on the planet, a smart white friend to help them out of the trouble they get into. They're heroes who could be like you, if you were Black I mean, They're on skateboards, they have an attractive white female friend to calm them down when they get too excited. Face it pilgrim, this one's got it all. Have I made my point?" [laughter] It is so epic...

K. It's so funny and, and he never got fired. He left of his own accord. [laughter]

J. But [laughter] that, that just shows you the kind of things that he's like trying to fight against, and just, just knowing kind of like the story of comics and the history of comics attempts at diversity within the medium are often...

I. Never went well...

J. They're very two-dimensional, they're very based in stereotypes, and like, sort of the white perception of, of that group, and so many of them have aged extremely poorly...

K. Yeah

I. Sure

J. And there have been attempts in modern, in modern comics for people who are part of the same group as these characters to sort of like reclaim them and refurbish them and make them more dimensionalized characters. So Ian, I know you've done some research on kind of like the background of comics, and just to kind of give everybody like a better idea of like just the

weight and depiction, the historical depiction of these characters that Dwayne was trying to combat, would you mind before we like move into his further efforts, kind of like going through that timeline and showing how diversity in comics was represented when it first started versus how it was when Dwayne came on the scene.

I. Sure, so. First off I would say that it was pretty nonexistent. There wasn't a lot of diversity, and if there were Black people in comics, they were a lot of times used for comic relief. So the first Black character made his debut in 1934. His name was Lothar, and before him Black people only appeared in comics really in forms of racism. In the 1940s and 1950s Black comic book characters roles changed a little bit—they started to transition from Comic Relief to Helpful Sidekick, and then in 1947 a gentleman named Orrin C. Evans, who was a news reporter, started the first exclusively Black published comic that was written, drawn and created by African-Americans for the Black community. It was entitled All-Negro Comics and it only lasted [time 21:12] a single issue. It was popular in the Black community and brought about characters such as Ace Harlem and Lionman among others, and these characters are often considered early Black heroes, they didn't fit the tropes that the white writers at the time were writing for Black superheroes, these people were intelligent, they knew what they were doing, and although it didn't last long it did have a huge impact on comics. In 1954 Atlas Comics (which would become Marvel) published "Jungle Tales" which included Waku, Prince of Bantu. He was smart, enlightened, an African tribal chief who showed bravery and courage and was widely scene as the first Black mainstream comics star. In 1965 Lobo became the first African-American with his own comic book series (even though it only lasted two issues), and in the following year 1966 Stan Lee created the 1st Black superhero when in Marvel's "Fantastic Four" issue number 52 The Black Panther made his 1st appearance. Only a few years later in 1969, Stan Lee once again created a Black superhero when Samuel Wilson, AKA Falcon, was introduced in "Captain America." He was African-American and could fly using metal wings and could talk to and control birds. [time 22:40] He would go on to become Captain America which was a huge accomplishment. And during these first early few decades (and actually it continued into the 1990s) all Black characters had to deal with racism in the real world like John was saying. Most publishers either stopped selling these comics or wouldn't put them on their shelves because they were racist white people. This led to poor sales and only a few issues for most of these early superheroes that should have ran longer. It wasn't until the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s until comic book publishers recognized that they were ignoring a completely untapped market and they wanted young Black kids to read their comics. I want to talk real quick about Black Panther like I mentioned earlier because he provided such a defining moment in Duffy's life. Black Panther is probably the most famous and the first Black super hero with superhuman abilities in mainstream comics. When Stan Lee and Jack Kirby first created him, he originally appeared as a supporting character in "The Fantastic Four," and he wouldn't receive his own comic series until 1973, but in a 1990 [Jack] Kirby explained, "I came

up with Black Panther because I realized I had no Black people in my strips. I suddenly discovered that I had a lot of Black readers and my friends were Black, and here I was ignoring them because I was associating with everyone else.” This would become a game-changer in a defining moment for Black superhero portrayals in comics. The Black Panther was completely different than the normal stereotypical renderings of Black people—not only was he of African descent, but he was poised, had extreme physical training and was successful in protecting his people and his kingdom from destruction. He was also the richest superhero and had access to advanced Wakandan technology and this was a complete 180 from the common Blaxploitation characters of the time, and going on with the Black Panther superhero, I think that’s part of the reason he wanted to do more of those individualized Black superheroes and that’s why he broke off from Marvel and joined, created, Milestone.

K. People do point to him as the man who opened the door for Black creators in comics. I mean because there were, he wasn’t the first one...

I. No there was a few...

K. But he was the one who, like, really paved the way, and I think it had a lot to do with his humor, and the way that he worked, like people really respected him. There was a really great documentary that we all watched where everyone only had the nicest things to say about him, they loved working with him, were so excited to get in the writing room with him, no one had anything bad to say...

J. No, even when Dwayne like disagreed with a script or had quibbles with it, he would help them take it apart and they’d talk through it and he give really good solid notes on everything...

K. Yeah...

J. Just a stand-up, swell guy...

K. I can’t remember who it was, but I remember him telling this story where he got on his bike and he rode over to McDuffie’s house, just to, like, show him a script he’d been working on...[laughter]

I. For “Ben-10” maybe?

K. I think so...

I. I think it was Ben-10...

K. I think it was Ben-10, like, but that’s just how much, like, his community respected him. I can’t say they didn’t see him as Black because of course they did but think just his respectability and intelligence was what opened the door, for not only him, but a lot of other creators.

J. For sure, for sure...

K. And that's how we get to Milestone Media...

J. Real quick before we transition...

K. Yeah...

J. Yesterday, last night I found out something so cool that tied in with this and I was really excited about it. So, Black Panther, for a huge portion of his publishing history was written exclusively by white people, the creative teams were typically 100% white...during Don MacGregor's Black Panther run, the one that Dwayne cites as being such a major influence on him, the 1st Black member of like a Black Panther creative team came on board...his name was, I believe it was Billy Graham...

I. Yes, that is , that is correct.

J. That is correct? Billy Graham came on board as penciller and did some beautiful artwork for the series. So on the way home last night I was listening to an audiobook, and it's this guy he's like read the entire like catalog of Marvel comics from like the 1st issue of "Fantastic Four" all the way up to Marvel Legacy in 2017, like just the width and breadth of 1000s and 1000s of comics, it's an insane amount of work, he was talking about Black Panther, the section that I was in, and he was talking about how Billy Graham was the 1st Black creative co-creator to be involved with the Black Panther book, it was during Don McGregor's run which was the one that influenced Dwayne so much, he went on to say that the 1st Black writer to actually extensively write Wakanda was Dwayne when he was writing Deathlok and I thought that was such a cool thing, and this was before Christopher Priest came on in the 90s and wrote his definitive Black Panther run that sort of crystalized the character like we know him now that's been so pervasive and prevalent like in the Black Panther movie or the Marvel Cinematic Universe, and I just thought that was such an awesome [time 28:09] thing that Dwayne was inspired by it, and then later on got the chance to write it himself as the 1st Black writer, I just thought that was super cool. So as we were saying before, such a big part of Dwayne's life as a writer became trying to break down the idea of characters as a monolith for the race they came from, that they stand for all members of their race or background, so to combat that, Dwayne decided if he couldn't get Marvel to do it, if nobody else was going to do it, he would do it himself, and this led to the foundation and creation of Milestone Media. All right, so let's start digging into Milestone. So, as we said before Dwayne decided if nobody else was going to do it, it was up to him to do it, and in 1991 he created a business to maintain creative and editorial control of the characters. He created, with Dennis Cowan and Derrick T. Dingle and Michael Davis, Milestone Media. He used the money he received from Deathlok and a 400 page story bible that he created with his co-creators to found Milestone Comics, and again the idea behind

all this was to break the idea of race as a monolith. The foundation of Milestone was built on four different groups of characters. We had Icon and Rocket, Static, Hardware, and the Blood Syndicate. Where would you guys like to start, how do we want to start talking about it first. Let's dig into this thing...

K. I want to talk about Static...

J. All right, Static it is [laughter]

K. I did try to find and read these comics, we don't have them available at the library (Spartanburg County Public Library) right now, and they're not available online or else I couldn't, I couldn't find them, but I watched Static Shock a lot as a kid, and one of McDuffie's goals is to write characters that, there not "The Black Hero" there just a hero, you know, just another character, and I think that he did a great job of that because me as a kid watching Static Shock, I was like "I love this guy!"

J. Oh, Static is a wonderful character...

I. Yeah...

J. He's just so exuberant [time 30:22] and enjoys being a superhero. He's not some gritty, tortured character--a lot of times in comics you've got this stereotype of the "oh, this dark and terrible thing has happened to me and now I'm going to fight crime" ...[laughter]

I. He reminds me more of Spider Man, like very comical...

K. He was based on Spider Man...

J. Dwayne was like "I want my equivalent of Spider Man, and actually Static was originally envisioned as debuting as a Marvel character when Dwayne was working there..."

K. That's right...

J. When Milestone became a thing and they were working on the story bible, he imported a lot of these ideas, and one of the things you'll really see when looking at the Milestone collection of characters, this was some of Dwayne's most personal work.[time 31:03] and he really put a lot of himself into the Milestone characters.

K. I think he said, I'm trying to find the quote now, but he was saying that like Static Shock was basically him as a kid—like loudmouth, nerd...

J. Yes, he...

K. Gonna get himself into trouble...

J. He described himself as a “proto-nerd”...

K. Yes...[laughter] did call himself a “proto-nerd”...

J. Super nerdy [laughter] guy, and that’s Virgil, Virgil to a T...

K. Yeah, absolutely.

J. Umm, there’s some conflicting information--in one instance I read that Virgil Hawkins’ name is actually a tribute to an African-American character, not character but an actual African-American person, historical figure—in another case it turns out that his mother’s maiden name is Hawkins, so there is a confluence of things there in Virgil’s creation...

I. I do have a McDuffie quote: “People write about themselves basically, fundamentally, no matter what character you’re writing there has to be a core of you in it.”

J. For sure...

K. Yeah...

I. Just like we’ve talked about on other podcasts...

J. And you can really really see that with Virgil [time 32:15] especially McDuffie as a young man.

K. So I think people are familiar with Static Shock to some degree. He’s a teenaged Black kid who has electric-based powers, umm, I think probably a lot of us people our age in the 20s and 30s probably saw the show...

J. Out of all the Milestone characters he’s the one who’s had the most mainstream exposure...

J. John...

K. Absolutely... so Static, who’s Virgil, in the comics it’s Static and Frieda, his best friend Frieda, and it talks a lot about the Black community and the Jewish community and how those communities were not always on the best of terms and, well, Frieda was Jewish so a lot of the conversation in the comic was how those relations played out...

J. Right...

K. And at one point, it, it gets to the point of basically a street war, like it becomes very violent, and the point that McDuffie is trying to get across is that this is the real world sometimes, and like Frieda and Virgil as these teenagers are just in the middle of it, and a lot of his characters kind of are in the same boat where they’re like forced into being superheroes or having powers

and suddenly like not knowing what to do with that, which is how we get to the rest of the universe, so...

J. You have this gang war sort of conflict[time 33:30] and over the course of it like you've got all these conflicting factions that are converging on this location and there's an accident, like all these, is it chemical gas?

K. It is chemical gas...

I. Yes...

J. Chemical gas is released and everybody whose there is exposed to it and it all affects their DNA differently so everybody like has like a unique mutation that arises because of this, they're all referred to as "Bang Babies" after that, the event itself is called the "Big Bang" and all the recipients of powers, people who are affected by it, are called the "Bang Babies..."

I. Whether you're hero or villain...

J. Right...

K. Yes...

J. and that's kind of the unifying element of the Dakotaverse for the most part...

K. That's right...

J. Where all the powers come from...

K. they're all in Dakota, the city of Dakota, not the state [laughter]

J. Right, Dakota city...

I. That's right, Dakota City...

J. Dakota City...

K. Yeah, yeah yeah, and so like all these other characters have stemmed from this event. So Icon is a very conservative gentleman who, I believe he was in politics?

J. Umm Icon is this superpowerful alien who came to earth like Superman did in the comics, he's actually been on earth a lot longer...

I. Since the Civil War...

J. Since, yes...

K. That's right, he keeps pretending to be his own, like, son or grandson...

I. Frederick, Fred, William Freeman, was, I think? Augusta, Augustus Freeman...[laughter]

J. Augustus Freeman...

K. Let's all say names until we get there...

A. Might as well...

J. He experienced the width and breadth of Black history in America himself from the time that he landed to the present, and, unlike Dwayne himself, Icon is a strong Black conservative figure...

K. And he doesn't want anyone to know about his powers so he doesn't use them until one day a bunch of teenagers are like: "we're going to break into the big, fancy house..."

J. Right...

K. And to scare them away he starts flying around, and of course they run off, but Raquel, who becomes the main character, ummm goes back to his house and she's like: "you've got these superpowers, you can use them for good, you can use them to, like, help the town and why aren't you," and, you know, he's Grumpy Old Conservative Man he's like: "I don't wanna..." [laughter]

J. She's this...

I. "I've got work to do..."

J. Young liberal counterpoint to kind of this jaded older conservative figure...

K. Yes...

J. And that friction between them informs their partnership moving forward. They become Icon and Rocket, sort of like Batman and Robin [time 36:00] except it's sort of a Superman figure. It's playing on a lot of these different established comic book ideas and putting a new spin on them...

I. It's like...

J. Taking them in a different direction...

I. McDuffie put a lot of regular dilemmas that regular people go through, he didn't want, just, aliens coming to earth and us having to defend them, he wanted a lot of issues that people felt

uncomfortable tackling at the time, and he wanted those in his characters to make them more relatable, so for example Rocket deals with teenage pregnancy...

J. Rocket does deal with teenage pregnancy and that's something that you're not going to find happening in comics, more it's more so now much more of a common thing, but up to this point that would have been a barrier-breaking thing and that's a very real issue that a lot of teens have to grapple with, but you wouldn't see that reflected in comics from DC and Marvel...

I. And a lot of those executives that were shooting him down at DC and Marvel were him wanting to bring issues like that into comics, and they wanted to stay clear of it as well.

J. That's right, there's a quote from him somewhere where he's saying like: "there's only so many supervillains you can fight, it's the everyday things that really ground and humanize these characters and make them feel fleshed out and dimensional. Koen, you've got a point.

K. I do have a point, umm, something they also really wanted to focus on in Milestone is not just men, a lot of comics up to that point were just all these men, and it got, you know, a handful of, like, women sidekicks, but Milestone was like: "no we want to talk about all different kinds of people, all different kinds of genders, we want to talk about Asian-Americans, and Latinas and Latinos and women and just focus on those things that haven't been talked about enough, because they wanted to invite more readers and, and they wanted more people to be able to relate to their stories.

A. Did McDuffie ever get into disability representation, because I think that would be a really interesting direction to take comics in, especially with modern conversations about Ableism?

K. I think Deathlok was a little bit of that just because he was trapped in a cyborg body...

J. Right...

K. But it wasn't explicit I would say.

J. No. As far as that kind of representation it is pretty lacking. I can just think of a couple like Deathlok, Cyborg at DC is a pretty major recent example of that—Professor Xavier from the X-Men comics...

I. Mmm...

A. Okay...

K. Yeah...

J. It's something that is there but not nearly as much as it could be.

A. I feel like that would be, not necessarily an easy thing to do, at least not an easy thing to do well, but I think it'd be so valuable to the comic book community...

J. For sure...

I. Yeah, that's right up McDuffie's road is...

A. Yeah...

I. Inclusivity...

K. Yeah. It would've been great to hear his take on that I think if he had lived a little bit longer, I hate saying that, but if he had...

A. Yeah...

K. Like lived into like the later 2000s he probably would have taken up a challenge like that...

I. Addressing that...

J. For sure. It seems like he's always trying to like find and identify the missing pieces then trying to find a way to fill those in and bring that representation to the fore, and I can totally see him tackling something like that.

I. Blood Syndicate, that was pretty big on bringing in different ethnicities, correct? I didn't get that far into my research...

J. So, Blood Syndicate [time 39:35] is something really different than other properties that you've seen in comics, and it stems out of the Big Bang event that led to the creation of the other superhuman characters in this universe. So the Blood Syndicate is made up of remnants of some of the gangs that participated in the Paris Island event where the Big Bang started. These characters were each part of individual gangs they survived, they had the powers and then over the course of it they combined together and formed this team that was working to protect Paris Island from other characters and their name, the Blood Syndicate, is actually a composite of the names of the different gangs that comprised them originally. Does that make sense?

K. Yeah, umm. Can you give me, can you give us an example of the names?

J. Uhh, sure. So the Blood Syndicate derives its name because it's made up of different members of groups that were originally the Paris Island Bloods and the Force Syndicate, so these groups combined together to form the Blood Syndicate and that kind of the origin of that and they are working together as a gang to protect Paris Island.

I. Gotcha.

K. The other big character to come out of Milestone was Hardware which, for McDuffie, was a representation of his self-doubt. Hardware was not a stereotype but he was leaning more toward the “Angry Black Character” because it was a conversation with the fear that McDuffie had in himself [time 41:15]. McDuffie was a big man; he was very tall, he had a very intimidating...

I. 6’6”...

K. Demeanor about him...

A. People were intimidated by him which wasn’t necessarily [inaudible]

K. Just because...He’s not a scary guy, he’s not scary but he was a big guy...

I. Gentle giant...

K. He didn’t smile a lot so people kind of looked at him and they were like, they think he’s scary, and so this, this character Hardware was that manifestation of like...”what if I actually do become this scary man that everybody thinks I am?”

J. And to kind of like touch on several things that we’ve talked about, umm before. Hardware is kind of like the flipside to Deathlok...

K. Mmm-hmm...

J. As a character. Deathlok was sort of this representation of Dwayne’s ideal self, whereas Hardware represented, like Koen was saying, his self-doubt and who he was afraid he could be...

K. Yeah...

J. And these two different paradigms were rooted in that experience he had where his research as a physicist was being used for the missile guidance systems...

K. Mmm-hmm...

J. That’s very much a thing that we can see between both characters, where their research as scientists is being used by this corrupt military industrial complex to create weapons of war, umm, things that they don’t agree with, then it’s sort of like a very different approach, you’ve got this pacifist character whose like the ultimate analog of Dwayne vs. Hardware who is much more aggressive and is like...

K. Mmm...

J. Taking the fight to this guy. It's really interesting, kind of like comparing and contrasting the two different characters and the different approaches to the story, and you can see like how much that must've weighed on Dwayne as he was kind of like moving through and trying to sort through his life and his own experiences.

K. I think writing comics was his therapy [laughter]

J. I don't know that that's wrong, honestly...

I. Yeah...

K. He worked through a lot of his personality traits through these characters.

J. He did, and, writing's a great way to do that...

K. Writing's that thing where it makes you feel better and also makes you hate yourself...

J. Mmm...[laughter]...It's a, it's a might hard thing to be a writer, it's a lot of fine lines and...

K. We wouldn't know...

J. No...

K. We don't write, ever [laughter]...

J. We didn't just do a "Choose your own Adventure" podcast sponsored by the Spartanburg County Public Libraries. "The Mystery...

K. You should check it out. It's online...

J. Of the Mole...

K. Umm, how long did Milestone last?

J. In 1991 it started...

K. Okay.

J. And then in 1997 they stopped publication. An important thing to talk about in the history of Milestone is that they were constantly having to fight the image of quote, unquote "Black comics."

A. Mmm-hmm

K. Yes...

I. Yes...

K. Umm, sorry...

J. Go ahead...

K. Something that Ian had mentioned earlier is that there was this idea that was floating around that because these comics had all these Black characters, that it was racist against white people. The thing is is that no one actually read it to find out...

J. No...

I. Yeah...

K. It was just, people were like just saying that [time 44:19], like they didn't want to give it a chance, they didn't want like, they didn't want to accept that they could have main characters that weren't white [laughter]

J. Right...

K. At the time...

I. Yes...

K. This was like, this was the early 90s so...

J. Yes, so...

A. I did also want to point out a couple of controversies they ran into, because there was, not early on, I guess in the middle of Milestone existing there was another small comic group that was created by, it was another branch off similar to Milestone but they were publishing independently whereas Milestone had been publishing through DC if that was correct.

J. Are you talking about Image Comics?

I. I think so, out of Philly?

A. I think so.

J. Yes, a lot of guys affiliated with Marvel, Jim Lee, Rob Liefeld, Todd MacFarlane, people like that...

A. And they had gotten upset that they were, like, exploiting themselves, they were sellouts [time 45:22] for publishing through a larger name, but that was the way to push diversity and this like quality of character...

K. Plus that was the 1st deal of its kind, because they weren't, they weren't DC comics, and Milestone had all the rights and they could do whatever they wanted with the story, it's just that DC had the final say.

J. They had the right to not publish anything that made them uncomfortable...

I. And that's why, that's what Dwayne wanted, he said that was there saving grace was...

J. Right...

I. They could write whatever they wanted and it either got published or it didn't, but DC couldn't change any of their creative ideas.

J. Right, it's a huge thing.

K. Thank you for breaking that down...

I. It goes back to tackling those tough questions, or tough problems that no one wanted to deal with so...

K. They didn't want to face it...

I. They want to sweep it under the rug and he's [McDuffie] like, "No, people are going to have sex, teen pregnancy is going to happen, so lets put this in the background..."

J. Right, it's a real thing, like Dwayne and Milestone were taking this idea that Marvel had about the "World Outside Your Window" and really taking that to the next level, its next evolution.

K. So. [Time 46:28] basically what happened because of that situation was, McDuffie was like "...well obviously this isn't an issue of sex, obviously it's an issue of Black sexuality, and so what they ended up doing is instead of having the background they just did like this circle this like faded out black circle...

I. The heart, the heart around it...

J. Mmmm...

K. The heart. It was a heart. So, it's just like their faces kissing...

A. Yeah...

I. Did they put it on the inside cover? Maybe?

K. Oh, I think, yeah, they did the full version on the inside I think.

I. Yeah...

J. A lot of things like that...

K. Yeah. A lot of that...

J. Just constant pushback, constantly battling the public's perceptions of what they thought they were versus what they actually are...

K. Yeah...

J. Which is multicultural comics...

K. Yep...

I. Yeah...

J. And, as we said before, Milestone stopped publication in 1997 and that kind of like brought to a close this epoch of Dwayne's career which is going to bring us into this next section where we talk about his move [Time 47:29] into animation and DC comics. So, after a series of false starts in the early 2000s, Static was adapted into animation as "Static Shock" by "Batman: The Animated Series" producer Alan Burnett. Story editor Stan Berkowitz offered McDuffie a writing job in the show at Alan Burnett's insistence. Like the comics, the show would often eschew traditional superhero action to try and teach a lesson. It would focus on difficult topics directly. It was a very strong representation of Dwayne's Milestone work, a solid continuation of that—bringing Dwayne onto the writing team was like a really great choice. He wrote a fair number of episodes across the bulk of the series, there was even one episode, and award-winning episode, about gun violence. I believe that episode was just called "Jimmy?"

K. I think you're right.

J. And it has one of the main characters, Virgil's best friend Richie getting shot, actually shot in the episode and really tackling the fallout of that, that is not like you see on TV, and Richie's recovering from that for a while after that; it's treated with gravity and seriousness, and that kind of became a hallmark for the show. Koen, you've got a point.

K. I do have a point. I think the whole show is a lot like that. I was able to rewatch the entire 1st season and they don't beat around the bush at all, they just tackle these ideas head on. There's the episode about racism where we meet Richie's Dad and he makes a lot of really nasty

comments to Virgil, and he has to work with Virgil's Dad because Richie goes missing, he runs away, and they have to work together to go find him again, and you know by the end of the episode he's like: "All right, I can admit I was wrong..."

J. Yeah...

K. And, it's something that like that simple that you just need to acknowledge that your ideas about other people are incorrect and you move on like, it doesn't have to be this, like, painful "breaking up with my racism" like [laughter]...

J. It, it doesn't. It's a nice, realistic, grounded portrayal of growth you know...

K. Yeah...

J. It doesn't have to be this operatic, you know, breaking of this system, it just starts with him like "You know, all my conceptions have been wrong [Time 50:00] about this. I can be better, I will be better.

K. Yeah, I think that's definitely the strength of the show is showing the reality and humanizing all of these characters and these problems, cause the problems that the characters have are our problems too...umm, [laughter] Oh, I went, I also wanted to mention some of the changes they decided to make for TV, I think I talked a little bit about this a little bit earlier...

J. Yeah...

K. In the comic it was originally Frieda and Virgil, and then in the show because they wanted to appeal to the young male audience...

J. Right...

K. Umm they changed it to Richie and Virgil, umm, and that didn't change a lot of things because they still were able to talk about race relations, it wasn't as dramatic or violent as the comic got to in points, but it was still able to tackle a lot of the same issues. One of the things they decided to change that was really big was in the show, Virgil's Mom has passed away...

J. Yes, yes that is correct...

K. Umm, I don't remember they're exact reasoning, but they do also talk about that a lot...

J. Right...

K. And they talk about the struggle with grief, and how everyone processes grief and loss differently...

J. I can't remember which season it happens in, but they do have a big, a whole episode dedicated to the loss of the Mom...

K. Season one, episode 13 [laughter]...

J. Thank you Koen [laughter] and that would be the one, and I remember, I remember watching that as a kid and it being this really poignant character study, and like how the loss of this person has affected this family and how they all struggle with it in different ways...

K. And it's also, the episode is awesome because Virgil is still learning from his Mom just by watching home videos, like because the whole point of that episode was that they had a friend in class who was also a Bang Baby but didn't know, so when he was getting really upset he was basically turning into this, like, Hulk character and destroying things and [Time 52:07] none of Virgil's powers were working on him. He eventually realized at the end of the episode that he had to, like, tire him out after watching a home video of his mom waiting for him as a kid to tire himself out from his tantrum.

J. That's something Dwayne realized over the course of his career in kids animation it's like you can make this superlong preachy thing you know that's like "this is a lesson and it's a good thing and you need to do it," but kids don't respond to that, they don't internalize things that way, if you can, like, find a way where you can incorporate that into the story where you've got these characters that care about having fun it's like an adventure, and it's sort of like a subtle thing...

K. Yeah...

J. That's the way to go, that's, you have messaging, umm...

K. One [Laughter] sorry...

J. To your point Koen...

K. One other thing I really enjoyed about this rewatch was the relationship with kids and parents...

J. Mmm...

K. Because Virgil is able to recognize and see that he's really lucky that he has a really good relationship with his dad, even though sometimes there's miscommunications, and sometimes his dad get mad, or like he feels like he doesn't have enough trust from his dad, and that's something they acknowledge and tackle a lot, and then they also talk about some of the relationships with the other kids and their parents, like Richie gets really upset with his dad when he shows his racism and there's another character who is the son of the mayor, I want to say, the really rich, evil dude [laughter]...

J. Yeah, yeah...

A. Yeah, in episode "Junior..."

K. "Junior", yeah where he's super upset because he doesn't have any respect or attention from his dad, and his dad is super mean to him, and Virgil thinks that, like, just because there is a parent-to-son relationship they should be able to acknowledge their differences and work together and then that doesn't happen and he sort of has to acknowledge that not everyone's relationship is the same...

A. Right.

J. It's pretty much [through] storytelling...

K. It is...

J. that you don't necessarily expect in a kids' cartoon...

K. It is yeah...

J. This was airing on Kids WB at the time...

K. It was, it was my favorite channel [laughter]...

J. So, it's really just a testament to Dwayne's storytelling capability...

K. Yeah...

J. That he was able to, like, sneak in these like complex ideas and thoughts into like kids programming, and just like help shape young minds, and move them in these positive directions...

K. Mmm-hmm...

J. So, while Dwayne was working on this, eventually, we had creative interference again and Static was ultimately ended after a 4th season [Time 54:46]...

K. Yes...

J. Around this time Dwayne was also getting work on other shows. He was working on "What's new Scooby Doo" and "Teen Titans" at the time, he worked on episodes for that, and around this time they were working on an animated adaptation of "The Justice League" series. It was a continuation of earlier animated DC Universe shows like "The Batman: Animated Series" and the Superman animated series, and they were working on an episode called "The Brave and the Bold". It was a crossover episode. Rich Fogle and Paul Deeney were the writers, and both of

them were unable to complete the script for the episodes. They brought in Dwayne to kind of work on it, and, I believe, the story, this might be a little bit apocryphal, but I think Alan Berkowitz might have suggested Dwayne for this based off the experience working on Static [inaudible]...

K. I believe you're right, I believe that is what happened...

I. I think he threw his name out there...

J. Yeah, because Dwayne was in Florida at the time, like he was nowhere near them and they reached out and he worked on this, which led to working on another set of episodes, and another set of episodes, until we get to the point where [Time 56:00] in Justice League Unlimited, he is promoted to Producer, and he's, like, got control of the writers' room and they're working on these super-serialized scripts...

K. Yeah...

J. Yes Ian...

I. So I was just going to add that McDuffie would later say that "...going from working on characters that I'd helped create to working on cultural institutions like Superman and Batman had been one of the biggest thrills of my professional life." And he pushed hard to make sure that the League was seen as individual characters like you had said earlier. You could put a line in any of them and you wouldn't, couldn't tell the difference, so I thought that that was cool seeing how he brought individualism to Justice League and the success he had with creating backstory for those characters helped land him the job with "Justice League Unlimited."

J. For sure and, gosh, I've watched both Justice League series like so many times...

I. Mmm-hmm...

J. And just the character work they do over the course of both shows, it's just really profound, you get so invested in everybody and their journey, and then Unlimited, the cast just balloons to this huge, huge number of characters but they still find a way to have, like, these little character moments, they kind of make you fall in love with these superheroes of lesser renown. Booster Gold for example has a really strong episode, The Question becomes a fan favorite character...

I. And I'd read that them being 30-minute episodes helped build the characters; you couldn't mess around with any of the unwanted stuff, you'd could get just down and dirty into the character...

J. That's right. So Ian, to what you were saying that's true. Between the two Justice League series, the first set was characterized by kind of having these multi-part sagas, two and three part stories, whereas Justice League Unlimited became much more individualized while telling a long form story arc in the background, so you'd have these one off stories like, "The Greatest Story Never Told with Booster Gold," umm a lot of stuff with The Question investigating this political corruption through the government. There's an episode where The Question and Huntress are like on a date and they're trying to oppose Black Canary and Green Arrow over the course of it...

I. And so there was some structural changes as well, correct, going from an hour-long episode to a 30-minute episode they could get more in depth with the characters since they were introducing all these new characters and they wouldn't be kind of lost in the mix...

J. That's right, like, because it's just 30 minutes you're doing this standalone thing and you're digging [Time 58:42] into that handful of characters you've got in that episode, that two or three...

I. Sure...

J. Umm. The way that they accomplished this is that they took the original League members and they'd throw in like two new ones and they'd like hang out for the course of the episode go on a mission, have an adventure, that sort of thing.

I. Okay.

J. But it's genius and it really let McDuffie hone in on what he wanted to focus on...

I. I was reading where they were saying that the Justice League is very 1950s and outdated and McDuffie just came in and totally revamped the series.

J. Right, he made sure that everyone had a defined personality and voice and that's something that the DC characters get criticized for a lot because they were made in this time where it's like everyone like just strait-laced and perfect...

I. mmm-hmm...

J. And you're just like a colorful costume with superpowers. Like the Marvel guys, everybody has this angst and clearly defined struggle...

A. What I like in the Justice League animated series, not the unlimited, I think it's Fury?

J. With the Amazon...

A. Yes, so there we have kind of like the challenge of 1st Wave Feminism and then, like on a more modern...

J. Yes...

A. Version, because that's one of the two episode series McDuffie worked on, correct?

J. Yes, Fury was one, the Brave and the Bold was another set. I can't remember the whole breakdown because there's some that were two or three-parters he might have contributed to one but not the whole set, umm Star-Crossed, the big like series finale for the main one, I think he contributed to one of the parts but maybe didn't necessarily work on all three, or at least receive credit, a...

A. Yeah...

J. Lion's share of credit for all three. But, yeah, always trying to work in all these really cool ideas like showcase a variety of viewpoints, work in really complex ideas for younger viewers, it's just a testament to Dwayne's ability as a storyteller just how much of a genius he was, I mean you really see it start to take shape here. And while this was going on, Dwayne was kind of brought in to pitch ideas for the Ben-10 show...

K. Yeah...

J. And he revealed initially he'd consult on the original format which was where Ben and his sister and grandfather were just travelling around in an RV...

K. Yeah...

J. At that time it was just going to be Ben transforming into like superheroes or other versions of himself, and like Dwayne kind of fell off the project and they revamped it into Aliens. For the 2nd series, Alien Force, they brought Dwayne back on in full and he got to supervise and really like bring a lot of his strengths that he'd honed over Static and Justice League to bear on the Ben-10 universe.

I. So after the success of season three of Ben-10: Alien Force...

J. Alien, yes...

K. Alien Force is two and Omniverse is three, isn't that right?

J. So, the way they break it up is the...

I. [Inaudible] Classic Ben?....

J. So like the 1st...

K. Yeah [laughter]...

J. The 1st, the 1st was like Ben-10...

K. Yeah...

J. And that was like the 1st "series." Not there might have been like a couple of seasons of that, that...

K. Yes...

J. That series. Then, Alien Force [time 1:02:00] would have been season...

I. Season three...

J. Three, but was series two...

K. Got it...

I. Okay...

K. Okay so the next, okay yeah...

I. So with Ben-10: Alien Force, McDuffie really went ahead and made the show stronger with the DC style animation and that stuff but what was unfortunately working against him was the fact the original Ben-10 show was created for younger kids, and it was created solely to sell toys. Well when Ben-10: Alien Force came around and those kids got a little bit older, although it had a huge viewership, they weren't selling as many toys, so the executives came back to McDuffie and said that "we want you to go back to how it used to be where there's no character arcs, there's no character development and everyone's kind of zany, nothing is really taken seriously..."

J. Right...

K. Mmm-hmm...

I. And that kind of started to ruin they show and they lost a lot of viewers that hey had from when McDuffie was writing...

J. Right. It was just so sudden; it was like whiplash. All the sudden Ben was behaving more like he did in series 1 and...

I. Exactly...

J. And like all these seasons of character development you had under the Alien Force series, like it was just undone with no explanation, it was weird...

I. Yeah, and Koen you said you had a favorite episode?

K. Not exactly a favorite episode—I, when I was a kid I watched the original Ben-10 when it became Alien Force and Omniverse I was older and I was like “Yeah, I’m not interested anymore.” [laughter]

A. That’s so cool...

J. Koen’s so cool [laughter]...

K. Too cool for Ben-10, but there is an episode I was researching for this podcast where McDuffie wanted to talk about how he was upset about Guantanamo Bay, and how this prison basically was happening under our noses, and people were not getting, they were not getting the treatment they deserved, they were being charged for like nothing, I mean there was a lot of things wrong...

I. No trial...

K. No trial...

I. Just [inaudible] without sentence...

K. Yes, that’s what I wanted to say. Thank you, [laughter] and so he writes an episode with Area-51 that is meant to represent Guantanamo Bay, and there’s an alien there who like has a family and has a history and shouldn’t be there or like...

I. He’d been there for 50 years or something...

K. 50 years, and eventually like breaks out and attacks the warden, and he like begs Ben to kill him. Like it’s a really dark episode for...

J. Yeah...

K. A children’s show. Of course Ben doesn’t, but it just sort of brings to light the horrors of reality and how we can kind of take those horrors and [Time 1:04:49], we see them as surreal, we see them as something like an alien in a jail when in reality it’s much closer to home.

J. That’s right...

I. Yeah...

J. Actual...

I. That was pretty powerful...

K. Yeah...

I. Episode...

J. Yeah, just masterclass storytelling from McDuffie as...

K. Yes...

I. For sure...

K. Of course...

J. Usual, he's firing on all cylinders, he's really getting to do what he wants to do, that's the kind of powerhouse storytelling you expect from him. It just speaks volumes to Dwayne. So, to kind of wrap up Dwayne's time in animation which unfortunately kind of dovetails with the last days of Dwayne's life, we have to talk about Dwayne's work in the DC animated original movie sector of Warner Brothers Entertainment. So while he was working on Ben-10, McDuffie would also be contracted to write scripts for DC line of animated movies. These were standalone, non-continuity features. They'd run for an hour and 10 minutes, hour and 15. He wrote several, Justice League: Crisis on 2 Earths, Justice League Doom...the most important one and the last one that he would write would be the animated adaptation of the comic book "All-Star Superman" and if it's cool with you guys I'd like to like wrap up this by kind of like digging into that a little bit, and sort of discussing how that dovetails with McDuffie, his life...

K. Please...

I. Yeah, do it.

J. Okay. So All-Star Superman is my favorite Superman comic. It's a 12 issue maxi-series by Grant Morrison, a super talented writer. It's set outside the main DC continuity, and the idea behind it was to have the ultimate Superman story [Time 1:06:39], a streamlined retelling of Superman where everything is unified, everything makes sense, but in the first issue Superman receives a terminal exposure to solar radiation and it's revealed that he's dying, he has a year to live, and over the course of this year he is going to perform his 12 greatest labors the things he'll be remembered for so over the course of the series, Superman is doing all these huge and wonderful things—big things and small things, and you're kind of operating with the knowledge that his life is finite, that by the end of this thing he's going to be gone and the world will be without a Superman. It's very very powerful. And it goes from things like him having an arm-wrestling match with Atlas and Samson, to a flashback where he is trying to save his dad, he realizes that his adopted father, John Kent, is having a heart attack and he's on the other side of

the world, and he's flying so fast his hair catches on fire, and he's just saying: "I can do anything, I can save anyone," but he doesn't. He doesn't make it in time. It's like a lesson in coming to grips with the limits of your own power. So, it's an amazing story, a powerhouse read I highly recommend it if you're interested in this sort of thing. This was the comic that Dwayne was going to adapt. I think that's significant for a lot of reasons. Something that we haven't touched on as much about Dwayne was that the men in his family has a very short life expectancy. His father passed away at 48, his older brother passed away before him, and he was predeceased by his younger brother, Daryl, the same year that he passed away, so his whole life Dwayne was kind of like operating with this idea that his time on earth was limited, even more so than for regular people. This impending mortality kind of colored everything. Some of his friends said that Dwayne had insomnia, he just wouldn't sleep, he'd always be up working. When he married his wife Charlotte, the love of his life [Time 1:09:00] that's when people said he started to smile in pictures, if you look at the before and after it's a noticeable transition. Dwayne died 4 days after the All-Star Superman premiere, and I, just, I wonder, was, in taking this on was it sort of like a cathartic thing for him, him as this figure that was doing these impossible things, taking on these monumental tasks for the world to try to make things better for everybody, all the while knowing that his time is so so short...[recording gap] she said it was so hard to watch it with him and now that he's gone she just can't bring herself to do it. There's a scene in the movie that isn't in the comic that Dwayne wrote and she says it's super-impactful, and it's a scene between Superman and Martha, they're visiting his dad's grave, Martha is his adopted mother and they're just kind of talking about the loss and how he taught Clark to be the person the world would need him to be when, or to be the man he would need to be when he was gone so he could function after Jonathan passed—I just wonder, too, about his dad because his dad passed early and there was nothing Dwayne, you know there's just so many parallels and I just feel like this is probably such a huge thing for him, and you wouldn't know it unless you had this deep dive into Dwayne and his personal life, it's just super-impactful for me, just super-moving. Sorry to bring the mood, I mean, unfortunately you know...

K. Yeah...

J. He passed at...

I. He was 49...

J. At 49, just one year older than his dad...

K. It was like in the 2010s wasn't it?

I. 2011 yeah...

K. 2011, yeah...

J. Yeah, umm, and it seemed like he was at the height of his powers, you know...

K. I know...

J. Like, what more could he have done if he'd had more time...

K. Imagine the world if he'd have lived another year even...

J. Yes...

I. Mmm...

J. For sure, but to transition and put things on a better note [Time 1:11:16], Dwayne did leave a lasting and powerful legacy, and I think that's something that we were going to talk about to kind of like bring us out of this dark place...[Laughter]

K. Let's lighten the mood...

J. Yeah...

I. Absolutely...

J. Let's talk about some hope...

K. Absolutely. Now obviously a lot of people have been inspired by Dwayne McDuffie and his work, but one person I really want to highlight is Kwanza Osajyefo, which I hope I'm saying his name right, I did look at his Twitter [Laughter], umm...

J. You made a fair attempt [Laughter]...

K. I did, I tried to watch video interviews and the one guy that said his name just said it so fast, it was like obviously trying to not mispronounce it too [Laughte]...

J. Right, right...

K. But anyway, he's the author of the comic "Black" which is about how a small percentage of the Black community have superpowers, and the way that the FBI and the police have hidden this fact is through racism...

J. Right...

K. So basically they, they like, hid behind, they hid these facts of the superpowers behind, like, all these racist ideals that we, sort of, have today...

J. Gotcha, okay...

K. And I was able to read the 1st comic of it. It's really interesting, it breaks down these three different political groups: One, there's like the main people, the FBI who's trying to hide it, and they will pretty much kill anyone who gets in their way, and I mean anyone, they, like, butchered a bunch of white[Time 1:12:42] dudes...

J. Oh, wow, Okay...

K. So [laughter], pretty rough stuff, then there's this underground group of the people with superpowers who are trying to keep it a secret to protect the rest of the world...

J. Right...

K. Because obviously the Black people without powers can't protect themselves...

J. Right...

K. And if they find out, if the world finds out, there'll be, like, a craze and there going to attack people at random, or that's what they think...

J. Right...

K. And then there's another group of people, of the superpowered people who want to be free, they want to be open with their superpowers, they want everyone to know, they don't care about, like, the anarchy that's going to ensue, and so the conflict is between these three groups and like how do you, how do you deal with this situation?

J. Right, right.

K. So Kwanza in an interview about [Time 1:13:40] Dwayne McDuffie, he talks about meeting him and interviewing with him, and it's a really interesting interview because he talks about how he really wanted to work at Milestone, how he was like: "this is where I have to be"...

J. Right [Laughter] I mean his work seems like it would be a natural fit for what they were working on...

K. Yeah, obviously. He didn't get the job at the time, but he talks about how McDuffie was just so eager to donate his time to people, like they sat down and just talked about how the whole field works, he was just giving him advice, he was explaining, like, how to get an internship, and how he should go finish his degree first, and he just, he just gave all of this time to this stranger basically...

J. Wow...

K. It just shows how compassionate and kind McDuffie really was...

J. For sure, just a giving person with a very generous spirit...

K. And obviously it led to greater things, that moment in Milestone inspired Osajyefo to write comics and to get into the field, but and John you mentioned there's some stuff coming now and some movies and shows...

J. Sure, so, Dwayne's work really does continue on. Milestone is a huge part of DC comics, like their characters have been integrated into the main DC Universe over the years, they've popped up in animated adaptations of the DC Universe like Young Justice, Icon and Rocket have both appeared in that; Icon is a member of the Justice League, Rocket is a member of team with the other young DC characters, Static has also made appearances in later seasons. They're currently working on a live-action Static movie for HBO Max which is supercool...

K. I'm so excited...

J. So that work definitely continues on. Damage Control, as we said earlier, is a big part of the latest trilogy of Spider Man movies. In the comics and even I think like one Spider Man animated series where Damage Control appeared there was a character named Mac, who was like the main Foreman, in a tribute to Dwayne. There's a brand new DC superhero character over the last couple of years whose going to be headlining her own show on The CW named Naomi, and her last name is going to be McDuffie in a tribute to Dwayne, so just his impact is still reverberating through the field and all the mediums that build off of it [Time 1:16:03]. It's just an awesome and powerful thing.

K. And we definitely saw it in the Marvel Universe too, with all the Avengers movies, and like Wakanda being expanded upon and becoming a part of, and Black Panther becoming a part of the main Marvel cast...

J. For sure, for sure. The response to Black Panther has just been staggering and enormous, it's one of the highest grossing movies of all time. It was his 1st movie, it's grossed over 1 billion dollars...

K. Wow...

J. Just, Black Panther is just a beloved part of the Marvel Cinematic Universe now...

K. Yeah...

J. Its, it's just incredible.

K. Another thing that came about after McDuffie's passing was the Dwayne McDuffie Award for Diversity in Comics. So this award went from, I believe 2016-2019. I'm not sure if it is on a hiatus or if they decided to stop awarding it in 2019, but...

J. Yes, because of the timing 2019 was the last year. Covid started in 2020...

K. Yeah...

J. We haven't been able to find any additional information on whether it's still a thing or not...

K. But I do have a couple of examples of people who've, comics that have won the award: in 2015 Ms. Marvel by G. Willow Wilson and Adrian Alphona [Time 1:17:27], and then in 2016 Ms. Marvel again, also Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur by Brandon Montclare, Amy Reeder and Natacha Bustos which sounds incredibly fun...

J. Yes...

K. I'll have to look into that one. 2017, there was Amazing Forest by Ulises Fariinas, I'm sorry if I'm butchering these names, [Laughter] Erick Freitas. 2018 with The Once and Future Queen, and then 2019 with Exit Stage Left: The Snagglepuss Chronicles by Mark Russell and Mike Feehan. And there's a lot of other ones, but those are just the ones that stood out to me, so...

J. Yeah. Dwayne was the kind of power and creative force that we're going to be feeling his impact for a long time to come, in big ways and small ways...

K. I would absolutely agree. Before we end I do want to go back to a little bit about McDuffie's life...

J. Yes...

K. Because he seemed like he was a really fun guy...

J. For sure...

K. And he mentioned that his dream job was writing Rom-Coms?

J. Yeah...[Laughter]...

K. I just wish that we had gotten that part of his life. He talks a lot about his experience learning how to write screenplays and writing for animation, and what he did is he taught himself by transcribing Woody Allen's standup...this was before all the bad stuff with Woody Allen...

J. Right, right right...

K. But like, he just taught himself by writing down what people already had made and learning from that experience...

J. Umm, wow...

K. Right, can you imagine [Laughter]...

J. Self-taught in such an accessible way, I mean he just sat down and just started transcribing a thing...

K. Yeah...

J. I mean anybody could have access to...

K. Basically he like learned how to teach himself [Laughter]

J. Again, we've said it numerous times, Dwayne was a genius...

K. An absolute, like, a man before his time...

J. For sure, gosh, and it truly comes through in these instances, you can really tell, this, this was a gifted person.

K. So something I overheard [Time 1:19:42] Anna and John talk about earlier was how McDuffie had to make himself smaller, sort of for the comfort of others, can you elaborate on that?

A. Yeah, so one of the things that came up in conversation was, McDuffie had a practice that came out after he had passed, his wife told people where he would, he wrote so much faster than everyone else, so a script that he said took him three days, which was already faster than it would go for other people...

K. Right, yeah...

A. Umm actually took him one or two days, so he would write it in a night and then not submit it for the next two days, which could be a clever ploy to get an extra couple days off and still be so much better than everyone else [Laughter]...

K. Yeah...

A. Umm [Laughter] Often people who are really successful...

K. Mmm-hmm...

A. Who don't necessarily fit the mold for what success is in a given industry have to make the people around them more comfortable with their talent...

K. Right...

A. And we know that comics and the comic industry was for, young white boys...

K. Yeah for a long time it was...

A. For a long time it was almost exclusively written by white men, so McDuffie coming in being incredible, an incredible talent [Time 1:21:07] he was not only a great writer but he was very efficient at it, and a lot of the people going into Milestone with him talk about how he was such a good mentor, and how he always gave them the space to explore their own creativity. In Milestone it was very productive, and it was given creative space, that's where the letter came from was a letter...

K. Right...

A. To Marvel editors. He was constantly having to tiptoe around and like call out the racism in Marvel's writing, so it seems a little less safe for him to exist as he was in Marvel...

K. Not to mention he was very tall. We've already mentioned that he had a very intimidating presence, even though he was, based on what everyone has said, very kind and compassionate and wasn't threatening at all, but if he just walked into a room people might be afraid of him just by looking at him. I know that he once talked about getting pulled over by the police because of the car he was driving, and, you know, early, like in, I don't know what year it was but, in the 1900s that happened a lot more often because not a lot of Black folk were driving nice cars, so they didn't believe it was his car, so just like his presence because of who he was, how he looked, he had to make himself, he had to humble himself in a way to be safe [Time 1:22:40] in the workplace...

A. Yeah...

K. To be respected.

J. Again, Dwayne he was, he was kind of a superhero, you know, he didn't do it for the for the glory, he wanted to, to make an impact, a difference in the world.

K. I think we can easily say that Dwayne McDuffie is our superhero [Laughter]

J. Agreed...

K. Agreed...

J. I don't think anyone at the table would dispute that. So, to bring things to a close I want to introduce our quote for the day, our closing quote. This one comes from Dwayne's father actually, and it's a very important quote to Dwayne, it's something that he actually put into his Deathlok series, and it's kind of like a guiding principle for Dwayne, or was throughout his whole life and the quote is: [Marvel music fades in] "You've got to do what's right, not what's easiest."

I. I love it...

K. I love it...[Laughter]

J. It's simple, but it's...

K. Very simple...

J. Very powerful...[All agree] It's the kind of code a superhero would have...

A. It feels very...

J. And what was McDuffie if not a superhero...

A. Very Uncle Ben...

J. It does...Oh...

I. Oh man...

K. Oh...

J. Oh, yes...

I. For sure...

K. And It's also, like, invites anyone to be a superhero...

J. It does...

K. Yeah, which I think was they're point making Milestone Media [Music ends], was that "Anyone can be a superhero, based on making the right choices. Yeah, it's that easy. With that we're going to close episode 4[Time 1:24:30], so thank you for listening...

J. That's right, thanks everybody...

A. Thank you...

I. Thanks [Closing theme music]

All. Bye

[Episode 4 ends]

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