ALEX WHYBROW

[PROFESSIONAL WRESTLER]

"A LOT OF PEOPLE AREN'T INTERESTED IN BLURRED LINES BETWEEN WHAT IS REAL AND WHAT IS FAKE. THEY WANT THE REAL. WRESTLING FANS DON'T CARE ABOUT THAT. THEY'RE CAPTIVATED BY THE BOUNDARY."

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In 1999, Larry Sweeney was still Alex Whybrow, a freshman at Oberlin College. He was a sweet-faced hippie kid in baggy cargo pants who weighed about 140 pounds and played classical guitar. After graduation, Whybrow moved to Allentown, Pennsylvania to begin training at Chikara Wrestle Factory—a career move equivalent of a rock musician heading to Brooklyn.

The product of this postgrad study was "Sweet 'n' Sour" Larry Sweeney, a blustery, unhinged manager character who quickly became a unique fan favorite in the scrappy yet immensely popular independent wrestling promotion Ring of Honor. Nowadays, he barges into rings, not as an interfering schemer but as a fun-loving heel combatant given to tie-dye, fluffy blond perms, and statue-bronze skin—a swaggering cartoon of a Californian with brutally mercurial mood swings. From challenging a tiny, prepubescent audience member to an arm-wrestling match—and cheating—to interrupting a heated bout to instigate a sound-tracked strutting contest with his rival, Sweeney commands crowds, a skill that has served him well on his journey through the ranks of WWE hopefuls.

Sweeney has appeared on the legendary live television program Monday Night Raw, *and carved out memorable storylines on a number of independent domestic and international circuits in Europe, Japan, and Mexico. He has thousands of MySpace followers and his own action figure. Still, to make ends meet, Whybrow supplements his wrestling earnings by working, at various points in time, as a housepainter, a Domino's Pizza deliveryman, and a Kaplan tutor. When possible, he holds down an apartment of his own, but frequently crashes on the floors of friends and stays at residence hotels. What follows is a conflated, condensed, and edited transcript of two phone conversations I had with Whybrow, one in late May 2009, the other several weeks*

later, in mid-June. —*Andrew Simmons*

I. "KRISHNA WAS A WRESTLER"

THE BELIEVER: What spawned Larry Sweeney?

ALEX WHYBROW: Larry is certain aspects of me with a big magnifying glass shined on them. All good wrestling characters are like that: amplifications of the wrestler's personality. Larry's egotistical, cocky, cowardly, and self-absorbed. He sort of embodies all sins. Initially, that was so I, Alex, could feel purer of spirit. I've been wrestling as this character for six years. I'm Larry when the cameras are rolling. It's good to stick with him, as opposed to theater, where you're constantly developing new roles for new performances.

BLVR: Have you learned anything from living as him so often?

AW: Larry has some positive attributes. He has great confidence in himself. He speaks well, and people pay attention to him.

BLVR: Do people call you Alex or Larry?

AW: The fans know me as Larry, and other wrestlers know me as Alex. I'm pretty comfortable with that separation.

BLVR: Growing up in the 1980s, I saw a lot of my friends get really into pro wrestling. When I was eight, I thought the world was full of these giant, aggressive dudes with wild costumes and outsized personalities who had to hash out epic dramas in the ring. I assumed they always lived like that, that they never existed as regular adults. Then, when I was about ten, I actually saw Lex Luger at a grocery store in northern Florida and was just blown away.

AW: *Hero* is a huge word. We're all regular people, in the locker room and in the audience, but when the music starts and you walk through that curtain, it's time to be larger than life. You have a vocabulary of moves to make you larger than life. People want to believe in you and make you larger. You can do Shakespeare in the park in front of nobody and it's still Shakespeare, but wrestling needs fans to work. Athletes and actors don't depend on fans the way we do. We appreciate them because they're involved. Do you remember the Junkyard Dog?

BLVR: Yes, vaguely.

AW: Before he worked for Vince McMahon, he was like the black Superman down in Louisiana. This was in '81, maybe even the late '70s. Wrestling has never been more popular than it was when the JYD was on top. He was the first black champion. Poor black people in the South loved him so much. He was a huge success story. We're always told about race in music history. Nobody talks about it in wrestling.

BLVR: Do you ever feel like a hero?

AW: When I went public on MySpace about my bipolar disorder, the outpouring of support overwhelmed me. Everything is overdiagnosed nowadays. Everyone is bipolar. But even though everyone's a nut in some way, there's still a stigma about it, and these wrestling fans, these kids, they're often not normal; many are outcasts—they really are. I've gotten that, for sure: "You're a hero, Sweeney." They do really like what I do. They find me funny or something. As a wrestler, I'm given the special opportunity to put smiles on the faces of people who often don't have much good stuff going on in their lives. They appreciate it, and while I like the recognition, I know it's not heroic. Being a fireman is heroic.

BLVR: Are you religious?

AW: I consider myself Hindu, but I don't go to temple. I read up on many religions, though, and I believe in all of them. They all say the same thing. I try to have a direct relationship with higher power.

BLVR: Why identify as Hindu, though?

AW: I love the philosophy. Do you know Jiddu Krish-

namurti?

BLVR: Not really.

AW: He was born in 1895. He underwent a physical process at the age of twenty-seven, a huge influx of energy. He was educated to be this new world religion teacher. He was supposed to declare a new religion at the age of thirty-three, the same age Christ was when he died. Instead, he said that truth is a pathless land. And then he toured the world.

BLVR: Does that mean any path to truth is a perfectly good one?

AW: It means that there is no path. Imagining a path to truth will lead you away from truth. It's a construct of thought: instead of inhabiting an alternate dimension, truth is directly accessible right here.

BLVR: Has wrestling revealed truths to you?

AW: No, but going after a dream and coming back has. I'm getting by, and that has given me insight into life's purpose. Purpose keeps you connected to the earth and yourself in a positive way. The truth is here; that's relaxing. Before I became a wrestler, there were sleepless nights spent thinking I was wasting time in college because I had to become a wrestler. If I hadn't done that, I would have been lost.

BLVR: But you have tools and knowledge you've amassed as a world traveler, an avid reader, an actor, and a spiritual seeker. In a way, your liberal arts education prepared you for this career.

AW: That's always running through me. I took a class in Transcendentalism from T. S. McMillan at Oberlin. The final project was pretty open. I met with him to get the idea approved. I told him I was interested in yoga and wrestling. I think he'd probably seen a million yoga projects, so he said to do wrestling. Over twenty days, I wrestled nineteen people on the Oberlin campus and wrote a paper about it, incorporating stuff from "Self-Reliance" and other Emerson essays. I've gotten by in wrestling not by athletic prowess or death-defying feats, but by way of my personality. There are much better wrestlers out there, but I bring everything I experience to Larry. A lot of other wrestlers don't have a wide arsenal of resources from which to draw, and it shows in their characters. I definitely use my education in what I do. Whenever I do commentary on matches, I might go from using the wrestling terms everyone who's watching knows to rattling on about karma and reincarnation. I get to faraway places in just a few steps. I've been stuck in a lot of all-night car rides with bunches of wrestlers, and though I think the conception is that wrestlers aren't generally smart, I've had long conversations with some pretty deep people along the way.

BLVR: When did you get into yoga?

AW: High school and college. With all the stuff going on in my life, it was very important to get settled and work hard on my spiritual evolution. I needed peace of mind.

BLVR: Did you go to India to study it?

AW: That was the idea at first. Then I learned about traditional amateur Indian wrestlers. I'd had no idea Krishna was a wrestler, that wrestling was revered in India. It's a tradition going back to the *Mahabharata* and *Bhagavad Gita*. I went to the Shri Satpal Pehelwan Akhara at the Chhatrasal Stadium in New Delhi to train. I realized that this was going to be it for me. I'm too fucking feisty to sit in an ashram and drink tea all day.

II. HARDWAY COLOR

BLVR: *The Wrestler* was an amazing film. Ram suffers like a grizzled Lamb of God. He takes any punishment life doles out. He traces memories in the wounds his body has sustained. The symbols aren't subtle. He's got a big Christ tattoo on his back. My question is: if you're fighting in the ring on behalf of people watching, and if two wrestlers' struggles are stand-ins for larger societal ones, is the pain you feel, in a sense, the crowd's? Is there a relationship there?

AW: There's definitely a relationship. Crowds respond to blood. We call it "color." You can do it like Ram does it in the movie, with a razor. If it happens au naturel, we call that "hardway." There's an art of using the edge of your knuckles to split open an eyebrow. About three years ago, I was in Toronto with my buddy Eddie. We were doing a match. Before, he said, "Hey, let's do hardway color—don't be a pussy." I attacked him from behind in front of eight hundred people and started punching him. He's on the mat screaming up at me: "You fucking pussy, do it," and I'm whaling away on his eyebrow to bust him open, to get that color. It's part of the business. You've got to take care of yourself, but if you can't get the fact that pain is temporary, you won't make it in the business. You can't panic. I battled being afraid and nervous for many years. You have to just say, "I know what I'm doing, and this is just pain." Wrestlers don't walk around feeling noble because they hurt themselves.

BLVR: Is a wrestler ever obligated to suffer because the crowd expects it?

AW: No. At this past year's Tournament of Death, this guy Nick Cage punctured an artery in his arm wrestling in a match with light tubes around the ring and glass. It split right open. He was bleeding to death out in some cornfield in Delaware. They had to airlift him out. He almost died. Wrestlers do the really violent stuff because they can get paid more. They want to impress fans and promoters and make names for themselves.

BLVR: Can't you make better money doing other things?

AW: Absolutely. You just have to be more creative. Wrestling is a niche market, but that hard-core shit is a niche within a niche. You won't get famous slicing and dicing yourself for dollars.

BLVR: How big is the financial incentive? Do promoters pay a lot more when you get bloody?

AW: There's a tradition of that, sure. A promoter might ask you to get color. But you might get an extra twenty-five to thirty bucks for that. And the work of it doesn't hurt in the ring because you're pumped up. That stuff isn't really a big deal. Do you know how many arteries are in your forehead?

BLVR: Does the impulse to take violence to greater extremes have anything to do with wrestling being less popular than it once was? Or is the envelope being pushed further and further just for the sake of pushing it?

AW: There's an inclination in every performer to top past performers. That gets pushed too far. I think wrestling should be family entertainment, which it usually is—lighthearted, with some comedy and maybe a couple of brawls. I've done about four hundred matches, and ultraviolent stuff has been on less than forty of the shows I've been on. Vince McMahon doesn't do it. He never will, because the mainstream population doesn't want to see it. It's a twisted little subculture. It's like NASCAR. Crashes are horrific and beautiful, but you only see them once in a while. What if there were huge crashes at every race? That'd just be human sacrifice. Certain sick individuals get off on that, but general wrestling fans aren't interested. I'd be shocked if it ever had broader appeal.

III. SHOOT VS. WORK

BLVR: When did you first become a fan?

AW: In the second grade. The first match I saw was King Kong Bundy and two midgets against someone else and two midgets.

BLVR: Hasn't there always been a stigma about pro wrestling? I remember watching it with my brother at my grandfather's when I was little. He didn't really watch it. It was just on, so we did. My dad would come over to pick us up at the end of the day and he'd say, kind of dismissively: "Oh, that stuff is fake." That seems like a pretty common reaction, one I've heard a lot since, but you know, wrestling is funny and entertaining even though it's fake and the guys fighting aren't really mad at each other. Does the fact that it's a charade make it potentially

less valuable or important?

AW: The reason is people don't like being lied to. A real fight doesn't look like wrestling.

BLVR: No, it doesn't.

AW: Wrestling is a microcosm of life. Different characters both unpopular and popular represent simplified personifications of forces shaping society. For fans, it's a great fucking release. It's for the common man, the working man. When it's done right, you see some justice in the ring when there isn't necessarily any in your life. Maybe that's why it's popular, why wrestling comes up when the economy is down.

It scratches an itch nothing else has for me. It's just you and another dude in a ring. Maybe you talked about some stuff, maybe you didn't. It's improvisation, communication, storytelling, and athletics wrapped into one thing set up to elicit audience response. It grew out of the carnival in this country. That's probably part of the stigma. In Mexico, it's folk art. In Japan, it's revered. Wrestlers are respected politicians there, not jokes like Jesse Ventura. In America, it's been a joke because we're such skeptics. No one likes having his intelligence insulted. The way Vince McMahon handled it, he was cramming down people's throats the idea that it was fake, a work. A "work" is what we say in the business when guys work together to create an illusion. When something is real, it's called a "shoot." Boxing, for example, is a shoot. A lot of people aren't interested in blurred lines between what is real and what is fake. They want the real. Wrestling fans don't care about that. They're captivated by the boundary.

On the independent circuit, if you're in the crowd, you can hear every chop and kick. You almost feel them. The boundary for a wrestling fan overrides any stigma. Once you get into something, stigmas associated with that thing disappear. It's storytelling, camaraderie, real, fake, something beautiful, and something terrifying.

In May of 2004, I drove for six hours to wrestle for twelve minutes. I got my face kicked in. I was paid nothing. And then I drove home. I had three other people in the car. I did all the driving that day. I drove all the way back, and I thought: Wow, that's it, really. Twelve hours for twelve minutes. What the fuck. What is this? Then you get a little bit deeper into it, and you see the whole thing is about self-expression, and that it can be turned into a business.

We wrestlers kind of understand each other. We're all shaped by the same demons, bitten by the same snake. It's something that bonds us all together, the fact that we're crazy enough to do this shit. It doesn't make sense. You go out there and get beaten up for seventy-five bucks. It's a full-time job with part-time hours and part-time pay. But people come see you perform. That part is great, every time.

BLVR: How choreographed is the ring action?

AW: There's actually a lot more improvisation than people think.

BLVR: Is the pain real even though the fight is fake?

AW: The adrenaline's always going so you don't feel that much pain while you're out there. After the match, you hurt. The number one thing in wrestling is learning how to take a hit and come back. You can pull the punches a little bit, but it's high-contact.

BLVR: Do you get used to the pain after a while?

AW: You get used to it. It's sort of good pain, like plunging your hand into ice-cold water. For some people, a physical thing makes emotional things easier to deal with. It's hard to describe. I've been shot so hard across the chest my whole torso went numb. I've broken ankles and wrists. I've never been knocked out, though. When you take a body slam, part of your brain detaches because your body has to hide what it's going through. Because, when you're performing, you can't just do what comes naturally. You have to let go and play to the audience. You have to trust the person you're working with so you can perform. If you think too much, you forget to emote and connect with the audience. Then you're missing what it's all about. ✭