

coverstory
BY JAY BOBBIN



A new version of "The Wonder Years" premieres Wednesday on ABC.

New characters live 'The Wonder Years' in ABC reboot

As a widely beloved, much-honored series gets a reboot, others live "The Wonder Years."

Though the original show's "Kevin Arnold" still is on board – since his portrayal, Fred Savage, is an executive producer now – Dean Williams is the central character, played by Elisha "EJ" Williams, in the new ABC version that premieres Wednesday, Sept. 22. The program still charts a youngster's coming of age in the late 1960s with his adult self as narrator (Don Cheadle's voice this time), but the formerly suburban setting has been changed to Montgomery, Ala.

"When you think of this time period in Black America, you don't really think of middle-class Black people," fellow executive producer Lee Daniels reasons. "You think 'impoverished'; you think of what the media portrayed us to be. This really sits with me and Saladin (K. Patterson, also an executive producer, who developed the new "Wonder Years") because we are around the same age. This is our story, a story that hasn't been told to America."

As the 12-year-old whose eyes that time is reflected through, star Williams notes his mission is "giant, just trying to figure out how (people) maneuver, as well as just trying to learn what they learned in that time. Obviously, as history goes on, you're going to learn about what happened in those days.

Now that I'm playing a character who lived in those times, it's more of an, 'OK, well, what is going on?' than an, 'OK, I remember our teacher telling us about it.' "

Dulé Hill (who also worked with Patterson on "Psych"), Saycon Sengbloh and Laura Kariuki play Dean's family (in the slots Dan Lauria, Alley Mills and Olivia d'Abo first had), while Milan Ray portrays Keisa, who is to Dean who the original iteration's Winnie (Danica McKellar) was to the long-admiring Kevin. Cheadle succeeds Daniel Stern as the comedy-drama's literal voice.

As suggested by his involvement in the new show, 1988-93 "Wonder Years" star Savage (often a TV director now) is comfortable with the changes to the initial concept, which earned the Primetime Emmy Award for outstanding comedy series for its first season.

"There's a lot of elements of this show that feel very comfortable and familiar, to me and to an audience as well," Savage says. "We're maintaining a similar tone, a similar blend of comedy and truth, the same idea of a narrator looking back on his youth with the wisdom of age ... but there are things that are incredibly unique about this show. The fact that it's a brand-new family and brand-new characters allows us to maintain some of the things we loved about the original, while also telling a wholly unique and new story."

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