

## **Bubbles Speaks**

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*In a Daily Beast exclusive, Ben Montgomery meets Michael Jackson's beloved chimpanzee, Bubbles, who is now retired and living the good life in Florida with other celebrity apes. Among the revelations: Bubbles didn't commit suicide, he wasn't cryogenically frozen, and he has not been told of Michael's death.*

Bubbles the chimp won't be at Michael Jackson's funeral Tuesday.

He won't emerge from the Staples Center wings wearing tiny overalls or moonwalk through the hot lights or cheese chimp-like for the cameras.

In fact, Bubbles doesn't even know Michael Jackson is dead.

No one has told him, and there is good reason.

Bubbles lives 2,600 miles from Los Angeles, on a Florida ape preserve surrounded by swamplands and cattle fields and orange groves. He is 26 now and he makes his home most of the time in a giant enclosure surrounded by native ferns, banana trees, water oaks, hibiscus, and Florida maples. He has access to more than 4,000 feet of elevated tunnels connecting geodesic domes and large enclosures. He paints and watches television and gives piggy-back rides to smaller chimps, and when a woman comes each Sunday to play soft music on a recorder, he seems to enjoy it. He digs peanut butter out of bamboo shoots and sucks on frozen hemp milk and munches on mangoes and sweet potatoes and grapes.

He is a chimpanzee again, and if you don't mind, his caretakers would like to keep it that way.

"Michael has a special relationship with Bubbles." —Animal trainer Bob Dunn, People, 1987

Bubbles met the world in March 1986, when a 14-year-old heart-transplant recipient named Donna Ashlock emerged from Michael Jackson's estate with a souvenir.

A photo.

Ashlock is on the right, beside her hero, awestruck. Michael's in the middle, the early Michael, the pretty Michael, the pre-allegations Michael. He has a soft smile and his left arm is stretched around the little girl's shoulder. In his right arm sits a fully dressed chimp, clinging to Jackson like a big hairy baby. This photo is important because here stood the World's Biggest Star, sweet

and innocent, mostly unaltered, still... normal. And here he was holding a chimp, like a giant question mark.

The story spread that Bubbles had been rescued from a lab and sold to a trainer who gifted the animal to Jackson. At first we thought: Well, we would own a baby chimp, too, if we could afford to indulge our desires. But before long, Bubbles was accompanying Michael to a pre-tour presser, drinking green tea with Japanese dignitaries, moonwalking for the media. In Japan, it was widely reported, Jackson had his hairy friend's hotel walls re-papered because Bubbles didn't like the smell of smoke. He went with Michael on a world tour and spent down time at Jackson's house (In his house? we wondered. Where did the chimp sleep?).

And in every public appearance, as Michael's eccentricities began to overshadow his musical accomplishments, we humanized Bubbles a little more.

Every time Michael spoke fondly of his chimp, we wondered what they were really up to.

"That's not so bizarre. It could be cocaine. Besides, I like the chimp, Bubbles. He's a funny little guy." —Quincy Jones, 1987

In 1989 came reports of Bubbles' untimely death: run over by a Jeep on Jackson's estate. (Not true.) A year later, the press speculated that Bubbles died when a fire tore through Jackson's Santa Barbara menagerie. ("Michael Jackson's pet chimp, Bubbles, is not dead," USA Today reported. "We repeat: Michael Jackson's pet chimp, Bubbles, is not dead.") The following year The Globe had Bubbles becoming a daddy and the papers reported he would be ring-bearer at Elizabeth Taylor's eighth wedding. (Sounds true, but no.)

He soon became another check on the Wacko Jacko Inventory: kiddie sleepovers, Elephant Man bones, hyperbaric chamber, surgical mask. Bubbles.

Then came the ugly news: Jackson's former brother-in-law James DeBarge claimed he caught the singer inappropriately touching Bubbles during a diaper change. The charges went public around the time of Jackson's child-molestation trial, and it was easy to assume the worst.

"Whenever Bubbles sees himself in a magazine, he'll pick it up and kiss it." —Bob Dunn, People, 1987

Patti Ragan guides her golf cart toward Bubbles' enclosure. The other chimps are climbing and swinging and collecting leaves while 165-pound Bubbles approaches the edge, sits on his haunches and drapes a hot dog-size finger through the mesh.

He's magnificent, stoic, a little white hair bordering his face. The broad-shouldered chimp seems at ease and curious, and as Ragan creeps along the edge of the enclosure, he stands and follows the cart, his marble-size eyes locked on his visitors.

"Morning, Bubbie," Ragan sings. "Are you following us?"

Though the center is closed to the public, Bubbles likes people, Ragan says, and is fond of his caregivers. Bubbles has lived here since 2005, when he was quietly transferred from California. That was the same year Jackson was tried on sexual-abuse charges, but by then Bubbles had been living with trainer Bob Dunn for several years.

Until now, his life here has been uneventful, save the rare snake that makes it into the preserve. The phone has been ringing like crazy at the Center for Great Apes in Wauchula, Fla. All the reporters ask the same thing: Does Bubbles know?

Ragan wants to be friendly. She wants to appease the public's curiosity, but not at the risk of upsetting the animals or jeopardizing their dignity or exploiting Bubbles' celebrity for profit, even if the annual operating budget of this preserve is \$900,000 and we're in the worst recession since the Great Depression.

To understand that, you must know that Ragan gave up her Miami business and her Mercedes and her weekly manicures to care for chimps, to live here, and once in a while, after the staff of 15 has gone home, Ragan slips out to the enclosures and sits with the animals. Just her and the mosquitoes and 28 chimps and 14 orangutans. Entertainment outcasts and roadside-zoo refugees and circus trash.

There are other bold-faced apes: Bam Bam, who played an orangutan nurse in the Passions soap; Kodua, who copied her rear in that CareerBuilder ad; Jonah, from the Planet of the Apes remake; Mowgli, from the Dennis Miller Show; and many more who helped folks make big money until they grew too big to work. Though it has been rumored that Jackson planned to visit Bubbles here, it's rare that celebrities are curious about what becomes of the ape actors when they exit the business.

"You wonder if they ever think, 'I wonder what ever happened to those old stars?'" Ragan says.

"My chimp Bubbles is a constant delight." —Michael Jackson, in Moonwalk, 1988

Though many reporters have called, Ragan has agreed to let three into the preserve. She does not want TV trucks lining the dirt road that leads to the unmarked compound. She even turned away a pushy New York Post reporter who showed up at the gate and demanded to see Bubbles.

If you think that's silly, consider this: CNN's Anderson Cooper was invited into the preserve last week and his crew filmed Bubbles in his enclosure. Up popped freebubbles.org, with a CNN screen-shot of Bubbles with the message: MICHAEL JACKSON'S CHIMPANZEE IS IN MONKEY JAIL, Y'ALL! WE NEED TO GET HIM OUT!! Ragan has walked a fine line since Jackson's death. She has become Bubbles' publicist, knocking down rumors that he committed suicide or is cryogenically frozen. She appreciates the spike in the center's Web traffic that has resulted in a few donations, but she must protect her big boy from the prying and exploitative world outside. That's why it feels so odd asking the question: Does Bubbles know?

Ragan obliges.

Chimps can understand English, she explains. Some even sign. When Ragan approaches a young female, Noel, and asks her what she had for breakfast, the chimp signs “banana” and “apple” and then suggests she wants some berries.

And they do mourn their dead comrades.

"But the concept of saying to him, 'He's gone. He's dead.' They just don't know that word. So there's no point in saying that to him," she says. "We join the world in being sad and mourning the death of Michael Jackson. We all enjoyed his music ... What we can do is give Bubbles the best long-term future we can."

Good health. Space. Enrichment. Protection.

She sometimes shows the apes videos from their pasts. Sammy the orangutan has watched himself in Dunston Checks In, and he seemed to be interested.

Ragan has not shown Bubbles the clips of himself moonwalking or wearing tiny tailored clothes or making goofy lips at the cameras.

She thinks she will, someday, but she won't tell a soul.

*To donate to Bubbles or any of the other apes, visit the Center for Great Apes online at [www.centerforgreatapes.org](http://www.centerforgreatapes.org).*

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