

## **Why Can't the Simpsons Just Die a Peaceful Death?**

*The Simpsons* was recently renewed for two more seasons after a bit of a hullabaloo about the contracts of the voice actors. And while I'm glad to see Fox did not attempt the show without its stars (ala *The Office* or *Not Quite Three Men*), I'm sad to see that Fox renewed the show at all, because *The Simpsons* continues to savage its legacy by staying on air, and I can't see the 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> seasons reversing this deleterious trend.

If you're anything like me, you can't remember a time in your life without *The Simpsons* being on air. The show debuted in 1989 (after appearing in short form on *The Tracey Ullman Show*) and helped Fox become a real network by becoming the station's first hit. For me, it was the first can't-miss show of my life, the show I had to see every week in order to function. To this day, I still have entire episodes memorized, especially the episodes made in seasons 3 – 10.

But since then, the show has morphed. Once savaged by parents' groups and the religious right for portraying a dysfunctional family and featuring filthy language and vulgar humor, the show has become the antithesis of that: a family-oriented sitcom. Gone are the intelligent non-sequiters of my formative years, and in their place are morals at the end of each episode. The show has lost the anti-authoritarian luster of its best seasons and instead become the establishment, especially given its permanence on Sunday nights.

So what happened? In a way, the show's attitude was right in line with the previous decade and not really right for the aughts. Like the other stalwart of Fox Sunday in the 1990s, *The X-Files*, the show did not really translate well to the Bush Era (*The X-Files* was canceled in 2002). Both shows suggest a globalized version of America and require a certain cynicism about America itself, themes that did not translate to the post-9/11, patriotic, Bush-era America. And though that era has come to pass, *The Simpsons* has not found a niche in what replaced it either. The show has attempted to modernize time and again (even re-writing plot points), but merely putting Homer in the context of 2011 does not make him define America the way he once did. The show feels dated, basically.

Really, though, the show's biggest problem is that the voice actors were not the stars (as the popularity of international versions of the show attests); the writers were. Two more seasons with 1994's writers would be welcomed, but two more seasons with these writers?

Still, the show deserves its place in the pantheon of television. Extending the show to further make it the longest-running show in history does not change that fact; it does however make me change the channel when I see a new episode and make me wish it had been canceled in 2001 so that I would not even have to question its legacy.

## **Nicolas Cage: America's Most Important Actor**

This Friday, a new Nicolas Cage movie, *Trespass*, opens, which will mean a series of bad jokes about Nicolas Cage. By that, I mean exchanges like this:

Person A: I heard a really bad movie is coming out, one with a convoluted plot involving a series of improbable situations, trite vulgarities, and hackneyed dialogue.

Person B: I know the film, friend: it stars Nicolas Cage.

These are, of course, run of the mill conversations every youngish adult has while responsibly imbibing at the local saloon. Formalities aside, the point is this: most people think Nicolas Cage sucks and has made horrible career decisions involving a series of increasingly bad films that he made only for the sake of making a quick buck so as to support his profligate spending habit. But this is an over-simplification. Cage knows the quality of the films he's making and acts in a way appropriate for each film. This actually epitomizes his subtle brilliance as an actor. That's not to say he's ever given a bad performance, because he hasn't—in most of his movies, he is clearly the best performer—rather, it's to suggest that he knows what is required of him as a performer to make the movie what it is.

To put it differently, I cannot tell a qualitative difference between his performance in *Leaving Las Vegas* (for which he won an Oscar) and *National Treasure*. However, one is generally lauded while the other ridiculed, even though both plots are equally convoluted (no one can tell me that a man who moves to Las Vegas to drink himself to death and falls in love with a prostitute is a more believable plot than a historian who finds a map to a hidden treasure on the back of the Declaration of Independence). Yet Cage knows that one movie is to be a serious film in which the plot is supposed to seem believable, while the other is a farce. I would even go so far as to say that *Las Vegas* is an easier role for an actor to play off because it has only to be taken at face value, while *National Treasure* requires the actor to turn in two performances at once: one for the other characters in the movie and one for the sage audience who understands the plot is ridiculous yet needs to see the characters making it believable even while also needing to see the actors themselves having fun with it. This latter subtlety is what makes the film so highly enjoyable.

What it comes down to is this: Cage knows what a movie's first goal is. While some movies might set out to be art, many set out to simply be entertainment. And Cage always knows when to take a film seriously and when not to. That's what makes him our best and most important actor. Cage is not going to try to make schlock into something serious, but he's also not going to turn something serious into schlock.

### **Ryan Adams' Latest: Sad, Contemplative, Dull**

Ryan Adams' latest record *Ashes & Fire* comes out on October 11, but NPR has been previewing it online since last week. Those expecting rock-tinged tracks like those off of last year's *III/IV* will be sorely disappointed, but those who like to buy music at Starbucks and love such earnest lyrics as "do you believe in love?" will be delighted by it. Thus, it is like every other Ryan Adams album ever: something a certain audience will

love and a certain audience will hate. While this pretty much defines all music, it's different for Adams, as the certain audience in question varies from album to album.

By now, you probably have an opinion on Adams, but unless you're a devotee, your opinion might not be fully formed. Simply put, depending on what record you heard first and were attracted to or turned off by, you probably had a very different reaction to the next one you heard. That's because he is both inconsistent and ever-changing. To enjoy all aspects of Adams' prolific career, one would have to have the exact same taste as Adams, because he will pretty much make an album of anything he kinda sorta likes.

But this is not a bad thing: above all else, Adams is a fantastic imitator. The key is that you have to like what he's imitating.

His first solo albums (after three decent records with Whiskeytown), *Heartbreaker* and *Gold* are country records at heart (*Gold* is a little more pop-oriented), sure to be enjoyed by anyone who likes alt.country or the likes of Neil Young or 70s era Elton John. But after those records (and *Demolition*), Adams released a Paul Westerberg imitation on *Rock N Roll* and an attempt at a Smiths impression on *Love is Hell*. And therein lies Adams' problem: few people like alt.country, Westerberg, and Morrissey.

After a couple years of touring, he returned with a new band called the Cardinals and released some of his better work. 2005's *Cold Roses*, a double record that leans heavily toward the Grateful Dead and cosmic country in general, was more appealing to his country audience, as was the Gram Parsons-heavy *Jacksonville City Nights*. But following this period, Adams seemed to switch almost exclusively to adult alternative with *Easy Tiger*, *Cardinology*, and now the singer/songwriter infused *Ashes & Fire*, an imitation of James Taylor perhaps. Of course, to be fair, in the middle of these three records, he also released the aforementioned *III/IV* and an entire album of death metal songs called *Orion*, so pigeonholing seems as difficult as ever.

### **Can Anything Lou Reed or Jack White Do Really Shock?**

Over the past month or so, two seemingly bizarre musical collaborations have been much ballyhooed on the internet: *Lulu*, Lou Reed's record with Metallica and— more perversely—"Leck Mich am Arsch," Jack White's collaboration with the Insane Clown Posse. What could possibly have fueled such collaborations? Had Reed finally lost it? Did White wake up from a four-day Faygo binge seeking to understand the last joker card?

Or did they simply want to try something new? Both Reed and White (which sounds like the name of a law firm) have long prided themselves as innovators impossible to nail down. In this sense, then, these collaborations are not that hard to fathom: they are the unexpected we should expect from them.

Reed has shocked audiences his entire career. He used to pretend to shoot up on stage in the 70s and has recorded several surprising records. He followed up his most successful

project, 1972's *Transformer*, with a concept record called *Berlin*. It tanked commercially and just when he began to have hits again, he released *Metal Machine Music*, a double album of guitar feedback. (Unlike *Berlin*, *Metal Machine Music* is far from wonderful.)

So is it really that weird to think of him recording *Lulu* with Metallica? Reed has publicly called his collaboration with the band "the best thing I ever did." (He also said the same thing about *Metal Machine Music* when it was released.) Still, the tracks that have been leaked from *Lulu* aren't terrible, especially if you're a Metallica fan (which I am not).

I wish I could say the same thing about ICP with Jack White producing. The song they recorded samples Mozart's "Leck Mich im Arsch," which is fairly easy to translate (and reminds one that the portrayal of Mozart in *Amadeus* as an immature goon was rooted in reality). Unlike Reed, who made a serious album, White, it seems, merely wanted attention. One member of ICP told *Billboard* that White "told us that nobody got the kind of reaction he got from his friends in the industry when he told them he was going to do a song with us." So for White, this is not one of his more serious production efforts (unlike his collaborations with Loretta Lynn and Wanda Jackson) but something closer to a publicity stunt.

Still, even as a stunt, it shouldn't be that surprising for White. This is a man who married his now-ex-wife on a canoe in the Amazon in a ceremony officiated by a shaman, then threw a divorce party with her on their sixth anniversary. He's crafted himself an image rooted in being weird and eccentric right down to his look (very similar to the young Severus Snape in the last *Harry Potter* movie if Snape wore Western wear). If the intended effect of working with Detroit's second worst musical act (Kid Rock is the worst) was to get people talking, mission accomplished.