

Ten Great TV Shows Cancelled Way Too Soon

by Brandon Kruse

With a slew of TV shows getting the axe over the last week (*Pushing Daisies*, *Lipstick Jungle*, and *Dirty, Sexy Money*, among others), one can't help but think of past shows that were cancelled well before their time. Here's one man's list of the ten best of those premature cancellations, opening up eligibility to shows that ran three seasons or fewer, and excluding those that left under their own power (i.e. the BBC version of *The Office*):

10. *Bosom Buddies*

Aired: 1980-82

Seasons: 2

Episodes: 38

Network: ABC

What It Should Have Been: A popular albeit lightweight farce along the lines of *Laverne & Shirley*

I can't defend *Bosom Buddies* as much more than a guilty pleasure, but it did give the world Tom Hanks, the underrated Holland Taylor and the criminally underappreciated Peter Scolari, all of whom combined to carry the show on their backs. I'd love to see some network throw a bundle of money at Hanks and Scolari to reunite them on a new show, because they worked together beautifully. (Unlikely to happen with Hanks's film career, but still, a man can dream, can't he?)

9. *The Critic*

Aired: 1994-95

Seasons: 2

Episodes: 23

Network: First ABC, then FOX

What It Should Have Been: A solid second-tier animated comedy, on par with say *King of the Hill*

The *Critic* had the misfortune of living in the shadow of *The Simpsons*, which was at the absolute peak of its brilliance when Jay Sherman & Co. hit the air. No animated series was going to survive that comparison, not even one that was created by two former *Simpsons* writer/producers and was executive produced by James L. Brooks. The *Critic* was a funny show with a solid stable of recurring characters, and deserved better treatment. Though I'll say this: had they taken Franklin Sherman and Duke Phillips, the two most hilarious characters on the show, and spun them off into an *Odd Couple*-style sitcom, it would have been brilliant. Quite possibly one of the funniest shows in the history of television. Alas, we'll never know.

Side note: Reportedly, *The Critic* was originally written to be a show about Krusty the Clown and his life in New York, but Matt Groening turned the idea down. The mind boggles at the possibilities, but ultimately, Groening's decision seems to have been the right one.

8. *Twin Peaks*

Aired: 1990-91

Seasons: 2

Episodes: 30

Network: ABC

What It Should Have Been: A pop cultural phenomenon on par with *Lost* (and it sorta was, just not for very long)

I think Homer Simpson summed up *Twin Peaks* best when he said "Brilliant!... I have no idea what's going on." Yes, it could be self-indulgent and excessively quirky at times, but it was always compelling, and always unique. Had it aired 15 years later, it would have been the perfect HBO/Showtime-style show. Too bad.

7. *Star Trek*

Aired: 1966-69

Seasons: 3

Episodes: 80

Network: NBC

What It Should Have Been: *Star Trek*, as we now know it today

So if the network executives who made this cancellation call lived to see the show's stunning afterlife of success, do you think they denied ever being involved with the decision to pull the plug? Has there been a TV cancellation that has been proven, repeatedly, to be as wrong as this one? Has there been a decision in human history that has been proven to be as wrong-headed as this one? (Maybe the Chargers drafting Ryan Leaf?)

6. *Invasion*

Aired: 2005-06

Seasons: 1

Episodes: 22

Network: ABC

What It Should Have Been: A sci-fi darling akin to *The X-Files*

A nice little alien story wrapped around a nice little allegory about modern-day fear and paranoia, and it was just reaching its quality peak at the end of the season when it got the axe. Pity show creator Sean Cassidy (well, as much as you can pity a former ridiculously popular teen idol), as his two other TV creations, *Roar*, starring a young Heath Ledger, and *American Gothic*, a satirical horror series executive produced by Sam Raimi and starring Gary Cole and Sarah Paulson (I don't know about you, but all those names slapped together has me intrigued), both got axed during or after the completion of their first season on the air.

5. *Once & Again*

Aired: 1999-2002

Seasons: 3

Episodes: 63

Network: ABC

What It Should Have Been: A beloved family drama and

ratings powerhouse, which I suppose would have made it a modern-day version of The Waltons

Centered around Lily (Sela Ward) and Rick (Billy Campbell), two divorced parents falling in love, the show was a terrific exploration of the complexities of extended and broken families. Beautifully written and acted, it was both poignant and funny, and... goddamn you, ABC! Do you see the destruction you brought upon this list?! I'm sorry. I didn't mean to lose my composure like that. But this one was a hard-fought battle, and there was a period of a few years there where it felt like ABC was just kicking me in the balls on a regular basis.

4. Sports Night

Aired: 1998-2000

Seasons: 2

Episodes: 45

Network: ABC

What It Should Have Been: A slightly dramatic version of The Mary Tyler Moore Show, and a ratings hit

Seriously, ABC, there was a time (1998-2001) where shows from your network were the TV Guide "Best Show You're Not Watching" three times in a four-year period (The Practice, Sports Night, Once and Again). Doesn't that represent a pretty significant failure on the part of your marketing department? You personally shitcanned six of the shows on this list, plus two others (Pushing Daisies and Wonderland, which was cancelled after just two episodes) that just missed the cut. Why should I trust you ever again? Why should I invest my time in any new show you put out that seems even vaguely innovative or smacks of potential quality? Sure, you may be responsible for Lost, but that's the exception that proves the rule!

Anyway, I sometimes find myself wishing Sports Night had come after The West Wing, because Sorkin would have had a little more clout to keep it on the air, and because he had better refined his style, and I've long felt that SN had far more untapped upside potential than WW did.

3. Veronica Mars

Aired: 2004-07

Seasons: 3

Episodes: 64

Network: UPN, then The CW

What It Should Have Been: A genre-mixing, cult-inspiring critical darling with the ability to appeal to both teens and adults, a la Buffy the Vampire Slayer (so essentially, what VM already was, only more successful)

Why listen to me tell you how great Veronica Mars was when you can listen to famous writers tell you how great Veronica Mars was? Joss Whedon: "Best. Show. Ever. Seriously, I've never gotten more wrapped up in a show I wasn't making, and maybe even more than those... These guys know what they're doing on a level that intimidates me.

It's the Harry Potter of shows." Kevin Smith:

"(H)ands-down, the best show on television right now, and proof that TV can be far better than cinema". Stephen King described the series as "Nancy Drew meets Philip Marlowe, and the result is pure nitro. Why is Veronica Mars so good? It bears little resemblance to life as I know it, but I can't take my eyes off the damn thing."

So, you know, if you think you're smarter than Joss Whedon, Kevin Smith AND Stephen King, then I guess you don't need to check out Veronica Mars at all, because you'll be too busy creating the most kick-ass show in the history of awesomeness. Which will no doubt be cancelled by ABC two seasons into its run. Good luck with that!

2. Boomtown

Aired: 2002-03

Seasons: 2

Episodes: 24

Network: NBC

What It Should Have Been: A bigger and better version of the Law & Order franchise

My first introduction to Boomtown was when Bravo was running a mid-season "get the word out" mini-marathon, and though I had initially recommended it to my wife, I found myself unable to take my eyes off the TV, and immediately changed my plans for the rest of the day (this was pre-DVR). It was that awesome. And the first season was fantastic (when it was on, as NBC put it on hiatus midway through and moved it from Sundays to Fridays), with each episode showing the investigation of a crime from the point of view of several different characters, a la Rashomon.

Then NBC hamstrung the show in the second season by ordering it to focus more on the investigative and procedural aspects (in other words, to make it just like all the other 173 procedurals on TV), and then, after watching the show stumble around for two episodes, the network came after it with a bat and finished it off. They put it on hiatus again, and then dumped the four remaining filmed episodes, practically unannounced, on two nights in late December. Just a completely mishandled show all around.

1. Arrested Development

Aired: 2003-06

Seasons: 3

Episodes: 43

Network: FOX

What It Should Have Been: One of those long-running, multiple-E Emmy-winning comedies that, once it goes off the air, is a popular, no-brainer choice as one of the greatest shows in TV history (like say Cheers or Seinfeld)

If you've seen Arrested Development, you know why it belongs at the top of this list. If you haven't, then do yourself a favor and track down the DVDs, post-haste.

POOP READING

An Arrested Development movie is reportedly getting closer and closer to reality. This is how it starts. Check back in about 20 years, and the cancellation of Star Trek may no longer be the most clearly misguided decision in the history of man.
