

Mike's Top Ten TV Shows of the 2010-2011 Season

by Mike Wagner

It was a great year in television, unless of course you use the television to watch the news. Things have changed so much in the last 15 years. There are so many channels that produce original *good* shows, it is impossible to keep up, especially if you have two kids under 3. Heck, half of the shows in Brandon, Jameson, and Joe's Top Ten lists are ones I haven't even seen yet and still have queued up on the DVR. So, *Louie*, *Community*, *Dexter*, and such, I haven't seen you so I couldn't put you on my list even though I bet you are awesome. Meanwhile, 2005-2010 me can't believe that *The Office* didn't make the cut and 2006-2010 me is incredulous that *30 Rock* didn't make the list. It was a down year for those two lions, no matter how much I love following Alec Baldwin, Mindy Kaling, and Rainn Wilson on Twitter. Anyway, here goes:

10. *The Glee Project* I don't care what you think; this is a great show. The thing that really connected me to *Glee* when it premiered was that it captured what it was like to be an artsy kid in high school. There *were* some cool kids who wanted to be in plays, speech, band, and show choir – for the activity, but not afterwards, you know, with the nerds – and there was all kinds of high school drama, triumphs, coming-of-age, and wonderment just oozing down the hallway. I still watch *Glee*, but mostly just to see what they are performing that week. *The Glee Project* reconnected me to what drew me to *Glee* in the first place. Here were actual kids who liked to sing and act - and they had a shot to earn a 7-episode arc on *Glee*. I know a lot of people who would've been competitive if they'd held this contest in 1994. I rooted for the kids to find themselves, knock out performances, and save themselves in the coolest of concepts: a last chance performance for Ryan Murphy, *Glee's* creator. Competitors *always* thought they knew what they "had to be" to impress Ryan, and there were *always* wrong because he *always* wanted them to be themselves. Such a great lesson. And, the show gives you an idea of what it'd be like to be on *Glee*, they really have no time to learn all that choreography, musical parts, etc. Made me respect that show even more. It is much more difficult to make *Glee* each week than any other show on TV, except maybe *Charlie Rose*, what with polishing the table and filling up the water glasses each night.

9. *The Sing-Off* The only thing I didn't like about the show, Nicole Sifghjklfhsdlkjhfafsdxee of some girl group I don't listen to, is gone. I thought it was gonna be really weird to have Ben Folds on a reality show as a judge, but it is actually really great - he gives fabulous feedback that goes far beyond "pitchy," "amazing," and "no, you're horrible." He can make an interesting point about art on a singing reality show. The Boys II Men guy is good too and the addition of Sara Berellis (who I saw live before Love Song got big, something I continue to brag about) is great for the upcoming

season. Anyway, showcasing acappella is something I am in favor of. The singers on the show are really good and the only thing you have to tolerate to enjoy the show is Nick Lachey, who my wife refers to as "the most forgettable person in all of broadcasting."

8. *The Colbert Report* There is no more talented performer on television than Stephen Colbert. As Jon Stewart just said at the Emmys, that he can do his character in real time with the audience and the guest is spectacular. He thinks as his character and makes forceful arguments (often good ones) as his character *and* we know that he thinks none of those things.

7. *The Late Late Show with Craig Ferguson* The most interesting person in late night is no longer David Letterman. I still love Dave and he is still my TV pal, but Fergy is the most interesting person in late night. He's also really funny and creative. Conan has lost his fastball, Jimmy K's solid, Jimmy Fallon has a surprisingly great show. So it isn't like late night sucks right now; of course, I continue to hate Leno with the white hot intensity of a thousand suns. But Craig Ferguson is developing these cool relationships with guests like Letterman has with Julia Roberts, Jeff Goldblum, Sarah Jessica Parker, and so forth. He is doing that with Goldblum (of course), Kristen Bell, and people like Cornel West. He asks very interesting questions, ones you never ever see on other talk shows. He actually talks to these folks about whatever is on his mind. What is on his mind is never what the star is there to promote nor is it the star's most recent scandal. And he embraces the absurdity of these 5-minute conversations by ending them by giving guests a choice of an awkward pause or playing the harmonica to the break. Though I should say that I'm not as infatuated with the more recent inclusion into the options preceding the commercial break of "touch my glittery balls." The robot sidekick, Geoff, is fantastic as well. Even though he says it every time, I always laugh when Craig asks, "Geoff, have you ever been to (City)?" and Geoff always says, "Yeah, I've got a place there, you should come by sometime." The intro to when he answers emails and tweets treatment of "ass mode" is also one of the most satisfying pieces of comedy on TV in late night.

6. *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* After spending a year merely hitting .300 with 20 home runs and 110 RBIs, this year The Daily Show went back to triple crown numbers. Stewart is at his best when he is trying to be funny first and make interesting social commentary second. He is, in my view, the most interesting political interviewer on television, especially when he has a guest (like Mitch Daniels last night) who he clearly plans for. He doesn't put up with bullshit answers. It does bug me that his view of the American political system is a bit simplistic in that he expects people who disagree with prejudice on a wide variety of issues to just compromise, but that's a small quibble. The correspondents continue to knock it out of the park. Jason Jones's story about his own vasectomy was just fantastic.

5. *Big Love* If I was always hooked up to machines measuring my physiological responses to TV programming, *Big Love* is the show that would make the proctors think I was about to have a heart attack. *Big Love* was written and paced in a way that fit my interest in dramatic tension, hope, joy, and fear. Bill's constant battle between his ambition, his vision for his family, his loyalty, and faith was mined to the core of the earth in the last season of the show, but the real line drives were hit by Ginnifer Goodwin, Chloe Sevigny, and Jeanne Tripplehorn. The wives' evolutions, struggles, and strength were really, really compelling television. I thought it would end with Bill returning to Juniper Creek as prophet, but having him killed facing trial, much in the way Joseph Smith also was killed facing trial, was a brave choice.

4. *Parks and Recreation* Brandon said it well. This is the *Cheers* of the 21st century. Big laughs, smart writing, lots of heart.

3. *Curb Your Enthusiasm* C Your E was awesome last season. I thought the Seinfeld arc couldn't be topped and I was right. This year, the arc was not topped, but the individual episodes were the strongest of the entire run of the show. I think it is overstating it to say that the move to New York "reinvigorated" the show, but I do think that you get an ever clearer sense of what parts of Seinfeld were David's when you see C Your E this year. And, "I'm going to fuck the Jew out of you" in the Palestinian Chicken episode is the most surprising thing I've ever heard on television that also made me laugh so hard snot came out of my nose.

2. *Modern Family* I didn't think it was a down season for *Modern Family*. I think one major strength of the show is that they take some archetypes and some conventional sitcom situations and amp up both the realism and absurdity in ways that always land with big laughs. There have not been many shows that use kids as well as they do. Luke and Manny are both hilarious features of the show and the Dunphy sisters are pitch perfect. Of course, Phil and Claire, Cameron and Mitchell, & Gloria and Jay are all fabulous as well – the show even does a nice job with guest stars (Matt Dillon and Shelley Long's joint appearance, for instance).

1. *Mad Men* Don Draper journals, swims, drops tobacco advertising in an open letter printed in the New York Times, and gets engaged, all while getting a Sterling Cooper Draper Price off the ground. It has been so long since the show was on TV (and I admit I didn't check to make sure it fits the time period of our list-making this go-round. Every character is so layered, so rich, and so interesting. There are times in each season that I root for everyone, empathize with everyone, am pissed at everyone, and disgusted with everyone (except maybe Peggy). There is no show I look forward to more and no show that I have to talk about for a longer period of time after I see it than *Mad Men*. It is the best show on television and the fact that Jon Hamm has not won an Emmy is the biggest crime in Hollywood since something really funny

and obviously more vile than the failure to give Jon Hamm an acting award even though he's really fucking good.
