



The Ghosts Of Sitcoms Past

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It's a strange fact that the things you hate most can end up being those that stick with you best.

Take *Full House*, for example. It's been off the air for ten years now, having wrapped up its eight-year run in 1995. None of its cast members have been burdened with the type of celebrity that would keep them in my public consciousness; the most successful *House* alums are the Olsen twins, whose performance as young troll Michelle Tanner has been highly overshadowed by their "straight-to-coke addiction" home video empire. All in all it was a show that, at its best, was entirely forgettable and at its worst (which was most of the time) still makes me want to disable my sensory organs with chopsticks when I hear the beginning of its theme music.

And yet, I give you this: Danny, DJ, Stephanie and Michelle Tanner, Joey Gladstone, Jesse and Becky Katsopolis, Kimmy Gibbler, and of course, Steve the Goon. "How Rude," "Have Mercy," "You're In Big Trouble Mister," Stephanie backing Joey's red convertible through the kitchen wall, Jesse's music video with his PKU babies, Kimmy Gibbler hitchhiking, Joey on *Star Search*, Christmas in the airport where *Santa Claus really comes!*, the Beach Boys and "Kokomo," and even the aforementioned theme song itself, which begins something like this: "What ever happened to predictability/The newsman, the paperboy, evening TV," a fitting tribute for a show that celebrated predictability as its key virtue.

It doesn't end with the on-air stuff either. Bob Saget apparently has a comedy routine whose foulness makes George Carlin look like, well, Danny Tanner. Dave Coulier (Joey Gladstone) inspired Alanis Morissette's "You Oughta Know," one of the most hateful breakup songs of all time. John Stamos managed to marry superbabe Rebecca Romijn, who has since moved on to skinny-dipping with the fat kid from *Stand By Me*. Steve the Goon was the voice of Aladdin in the blockbuster Disney film. And Kimmy Gibbler, despite rumors to the contrary, is still alive.

This list isn't meant to be comprehensive (if you want that, check out the definitive *Full House* guide, <http://www.full-house.org/>, complete with fan fiction). Instead it's meant to raise the question: why the hell do I know so much about *Full House*? I don't remember watching the show very much when it was on the air. I certainly never liked it. And yet, some of its fine details have stuck with me with a firmness that eludes other, more relevant facts, such as the names of people I've just been introduced to or the combination to my lock at the gym.

The phenomenon isn't confined to *Full House* either. More and more of my brain's storage capacity appears to be taken up by long-defunct sitcoms. *Family Matters*, with Carl the cop (he was in *Die Hard*) and Eddie the son and Laura the daughter, with her long-suffering paramour Steve Urkel, who was once rescued from the ledge of a tall building by Aunt Rachel, who crossed a high wire to get to him after Steve got drunk off spiked punch at a bad kids' party. *Growing Pains* had Dr. Seaver, and Mike, whose best friend was named "Boner" (he joined the Marines) and who ended up teaching grade-school science to inner city kids as the show ground to its well-deserved halt, and Carol, the anorexic, and Ben, who just needed some goddamned glue to finish that school project, plus the youngest kid they threw in there when the show started to get boring which was when a young Leo DiCaprio made his appearance as well.

I'm not the only one who knows this stuff. Far from it. In fact, compared to most people my age I'm a rank amateur. I'm sure there are thousands of people who read that last paragraph and were unable to contain themselves from shouting, "The youngest kid's name was Chrissy, and she had a six foot imaginary mouse friend named Ike, you idiot!" People take this stuff seriously. I can't remember how many parties I've gone to where the half-remembered mechanics of some episode of *Family Ties* were sufficient to derail the proceedings, prompting some Good Samaritan to look up

the detail in question on the internet just so everyone could continue on their merry way. I can tell you that situating yourself by the keg and asking strangers what country Balki was from on *Perfect Strangers* is a decent strategy for finding a life partner. I can also tell you that in some circles it is far more acceptable to say you don't believe in evolution than to say you thought Gary Coleman played the title character on *Webster*.

Ultimately, a fair response to this essay would be for someone to say, "You didn't have to watch this stuff." To them I would reply, you don't have to read this article, but yet here you are. And that must have been the real appeal of the shows at the time. They were there, and I watched them. Sure, Larry and Balki and I had some laughs, and I might have picked up a lesson here or there over the years about the consequences of cheating at school, or date rape, but for the most part this relationship has its roots in the fact that I was too lazy to get up to change the channel. How was I supposed to know the consequences?

It seems mere proximity isn't the thing that we want to be the foundation of our lasting memories. Especially when we're talking about some fairly stupid stuff. The fact that men in their late twenties across the country are practically wetting themselves waiting for the second season of *Knight Rider* to come out on DVD doesn't move us past the fact that the show's about a talking car. Hell, *The Transformers* at least changed into robots and back.

But maybe it's a bit hasty to badmouth the importance of just being around. After all, look at your family. Unless you're a Hilton you probably didn't spend all of your time together flitting around the globe having wacky adventures. You probably spent it hanging it out together and fighting over whose turn it was to do the dishes. And yet, these are the most important people in your life. The same is true for friends. My best friends and I in high school spent most of our time complaining about how we didn't have anything to do, but that quality whining time together fostered a bond that remains strong to this day.

So maybe that explains the lasting power of these shows. We just spent too much time together, and they stuck. Instead of being that guy at your summer job with whom you hang out and have a couple laughs, only to never think of again when school starts, they turned out to be more like your siblings. And incredibly lame ones at that.

Part of me wants to believe that. It makes sense. It's a comforting theory. But there's always one thing that gets in the way.

You see, Mike Seaver, the incredibly popular star of *Growing Pains*, was played by Kirk Cameron. At the same time, DJ Tanner, the star of *Full House*, was played by his sister, Candace Cameron. This alone always made me uneasy. Throw in the fact that the pair once combined forces on *Full House* episode 1.19, "Just One of the Guys," where Kirk made an appearance as DJ's cousin "Steve," and you have the nascent hints of a conspiracy. But the full extent of the plot didn't become clear to me until I learned that Kirk Cameron became a fervent born-again Christian during the last seasons of *Growing Pains*, going as far as to accuse the producers of the show of being "pornographers" and having an actress fired for having once posed in *Playboy*. Suddenly it all became clear.

All of these shows, with their sappy family situations, and corny jokes, and enduring insistence on avoiding any mature or realistic takes on the American family were part of a Cameron-centered plot to brainwash American children into becoming evangelical Christians. It might have worked too, if not for the emergence of a new television network, Fox, whose bawdy, tasteless shows drew viewers in droves, defusing Cameron's master plan, and leaving him in his frustration to develop a new plan to convert the unwilling (<http://www.wayofthemaster.com/>).

So, the next time you blame Fox for "Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire," or "When Animals Attack" or their biased political views, be sure to remember that it's because of them that you're not out on the streets harassing strangers for Jesus like Kirk is.

But don't think he's given up yet. The first season of *Full House* will be released on DVD February 8th. Watch it at your own risk.