

“Friends” a pop culture phenomenon

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“So no one told you life was gonna be this way. Your job’s a joke, you’re broke, your love life’s DOA. It’s like you’re always stuck in second gear. When it hasn’t been your day, your week, your month or even your year, but...”

“I’ll Be There For You,” by The Rembrandts was the signature sound of a decade of American popular culture, and lately it’s been playing quite often in my living room. After recently spotting a good deal on “Friends: The Complete Series” on Amazon, I couldn’t resist. So as I’ve been re-watching all 10 seasons, I’ve come to the rather popular opinion that “Friends” is probably the best television series ever made.

Of course, only most Americans agree on the merit of “Friends,” and we must never forget the minority, especially while Bill O’Reilly is around to remind us. A billoreilly.com poll placed “Friends” among the worst TV shows ever. According to O’Reilly’s website, “[‘Friends’] made the list because of its reliance on sexual humor.”

Despite O’Reilly’s findings, “Friends” consistently dominated ratings from 1993 to 2004. The innovative ensemble comedy soundly established the six co-stars’ careers. Written and created by David Crane and Marta Kauffman, “Friends” won over 56 awards and featured eight Oscar-winning actors as guest stars, according to the International Movie Database: Charlton Heston, Sean Penn, Susan Sarandon, Helen Hunt, Reese Witherspoon, Robin Williams and George Clooney.

One huge factor behind the full-fledged success of “Friends” was the cast’s chemistry. According to IMDb, the six main cast members negotiated their contracts together so that they were all paid equally for all ten seasons. As quoted by IMDb, Kudrow said, “The six of us are far stronger than just one person.” Celebrity gossip magazines confirm that Jennifer Aniston, Courteney Cox, Lisa Kudrow, Matt LeBlanc, Matthew Perry and David Schwimmer have maintained their friendships in the five years since the show’s finale.

“Friends” used a concept previously established by shows like “Cheers” and “Seinfeld,” where the sitcom revolves around a family of friends rather than a family of blood relations. While I thoroughly enjoyed the show when I was a “tween,” I am finding it even easier to relate it for an even better viewing experience as I am at that point in life where it’s time to grow up and start figuring out a plan. What I really enjoy about “Friends” is that even though we watch the characters grow older and change over the 10 seasons, none of the characters actually grow up. Even after Rachel and Ross have their baby and Chandler and Monica get married, the characters still have plenty of comical misadventures.

Occasionally, when I’m watching re-runs of various sitcoms and I get the “Friends” vibe. For example, I see many parallels between “Friends” and CBS’s comedy “How I Met Your Mother,” which is currently airing its fifth season. The characters of “How I Met Your Mother” are always over at one another’s apartments and have also switched roommates back and forth like “Friends.” Similarly, an Irish pub replaces the coffee shop as the place where everyone hangs out. The bar in “How I Met Your Mother,” is also right below a character’s apartment.

Of course, not everything in “How I Met Your Mother” is a rip-off from “Friends.” The CBS sitcom differs by casting only five main characters: Ted, Marshall, Barney, Lily and Robin. At times I feel the absence of that one missing person, which is the cleverness behind the show. “How I Met Your Mother” is narrated by an older Ted, who is telling his children the story of how he met their mother. The series is then told through a series of flashbacks. The very premise of the show is that Ted is looking for his wife, so creating only five characters places emphasis and importance on that missing person. While “How I Met Your Mother” lacks the charisma that made “Friends” such a success, it is a creative twist on the six-person ensemble comedy.

Image courtesy of friends-tv.org



Photo courtesy of friendscafe.org

“Friends” used perfect proportions when developing its characters, giving it that charisma. Each character has their own quirky traits, but they are all relatable. For example, Phoebe is the free spirit of the show. She has a complex history and it shows through her music, opinions and attitude towards life. I would say Phoebe is one of the strangest characters on the show, but I still have no trouble relating to her. Rachel, on the other hand, is the spoiled little rich girl trying to make it in the real world on her own. She likes her designer name brands and cares about worldly things, creating a nice clash between her and Phoebe. And then there’s Monica, obsessive-compulsive Monica. She’s lost a lot of weight since high school and ironically works as a chef.

The men of the show include Joey, Chandler and Ross. Joey is an Italian actor with a surprising small amount of intelligence. He’s the ladies man—“How you doin’?” But he’ll surprise you once in awhile by knowing something the rest of the group doesn’t or by doing something very heartfelt and sincere. Chandler is the funny guy, at least he thinks he is. He constantly cracks himself up and everyone can relate to being the only laughing at your own joke. Ross is the nerd of the crew. He is a paleontologist with a Ph.D., an achievement he occasionally holds over his friends. Ross is the guy who gets over-excited about his work and bores his friends with stories, statistics and lectures. With the perfect combination of quirks and normalities, the cast of “Friends” really made the show.

“Friends” was a great series, but as life teaches us over and over again, all good things must come to an end. Excellent actors, great writers and an awesome theme song are all reasons “Friends” had such enormous success. But I think “Friends” is so great because the characters always have fun, no matter what situation they find themselves in. My mother always said that happiness is a choice, and I would say that the characters on “Friends” made that choice. Granted, it is just a TV show, but I can’t help being oddly inspired by the quirky crew to make the best of all crappy situations.