

Seinfeld

Ten Years Later:

Was It Over-Rated When it First Aired?

By Stephen Winzenburg

S*einfeld*, the sitcom proclaimed by *TV Guide* as the greatest show of all time, has now been off network television for ten years. When the final original episode aired on May 14, 1998, it was only the third time in history that the highest-rated series on TV stopped making new episodes, following *I Love Lucy* and *The Andy Griffith Show*. Whereas the earlier series kept characters alive through spin-offs (*The Lucy/Desi Comedy Hour* and *Mayberry R.F.D.*), *Seinfeld* characters only live on through syndicated reruns.

While his *Seinfeld* co-stars struggled to find success in follow-up projects, Jerry disappeared from acting for almost ten years. *Seinfeld* knew it would be difficult to live up to the show's almost mythological place in television history. He resurfaced in late 2007 in a guest shot on *30 Rock* timed to promote his animated *Bee Movie* and the release of the complete *Seinfeld* series on DVD.

It seemed like the perfect time to see if the original series matched its reputation as being one of the greatest, if not the greatest, of all time. As a broadcasting professor who has written a book on sitcoms, I watch a lot of television but had seen only a dozen episodes of *Seinfeld* when it originally aired on NBC. I was one of the 78 million that tuned in for

the finale ten years ago and found it so disappointing that I never really had an interest in watching reruns of the episodes I had missed.

With Jerry's resurgence in late 2007, I decided to watch all 180 syndicated half hours to try to determine how it measures up to others that are now considered classics. My conclusion is that *Seinfeld* was clever and often humorous but not consistently the greatest. It certainly is a very good way to pass a half hour and some individual episodes are classics, but overall it may not quite match the hype it is accorded.

Before *Seinfeld* fans object to the idea that anyone could actually suggest that the series may have been a tad over-rated, remember that most sitcoms fade with age. Many early classics that won multiple Emmy awards, such as *The Phil Silvers Show* or *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, are gone from the tube altogether. Others that were once considered the best of their eras, such as *All in the Family*, *The Cosby Show* and *Roseanne*, struggled to hold on to syndication audiences. Even shows that were top ten hits when *Seinfeld* was on the air, like *Veronica's Closet* or *Suddenly Susan*, go mostly unseen just a few years later.

Then there's the beloved *Mary Tyler Moore Show*, which 25 years ago was most often mentioned as the greatest

comedy of all time. Now it is lucky to make anyone's top ten list (though USA Today's TV critic Robert Bianco did write in January of 2008 that the Moore series is "maybe the best sitcom of all time").

Rarely is there a direct correlation between a comedy's original network success and its syndication legacy. And some series that didn't do well in network prime time actually attract a larger audience in syndicated reruns.

In the late 1950s, *Make Room for Daddy* (*The Danny Thomas Show*) and *Father Knows Best* were top ten shows and Emmy Award winners—but 50 years later the only family comedy of that era to still air nationally is *Leave It to Beaver*, a series that never made the top 25 in the Nielsen ratings and was never nominated for an Emmy.

Similarly, mid-60s industry favorites, like *Get Smart* and *Bewitched*, no longer air nationally while the two seasons of *The Munsters* and *The Addams Family* have regular slots on TVLand. In the 1970s Norman Lear may have ruled prime time comedy, but the sitcom from that decade that has never left syndication is *The Brady Bunch*.

Exceptions include *I Love Lucy*, beautifully preserved on film for crystal-clear reruns, and *M*A*S*H*, which continues to do well on cable with a relevant anti-war message.

Seinfeld is another—it was hot when it originally aired and it still ranks in the top 15 of all syndicated shows even though some of its episodes will soon be 20 years old.

But it may be a little soon to say whether people will still be watching *Seinfeld* in thirty to fifty years. The early episodes of the show are weak, in part due to the fact that the first 16 aired over a period of two years. The pilot (with a very toned-down Kramer character, no musical transitions

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between long scenes and no Elaine) is under-whelming, unlike the instant classic pilots of *All in the Family*, *Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *Cosby Show*.

The *Seinfeld* pilot was not picked up as a series and was burned off in a summer slot on July 5, 1989. NBC executives remained high on the show and tried again with four episodes in the summer of 1990, but those also seemed quite traditional by sitcom standards.

When the series returned for its third try in January of 1991, there were immediate signs of uniqueness. Episode 7 ("The Pony Remark") tackled the possibility that Jerry's offhanded putdown of an old lady's love of horses led to her death. Episode 8 ("The Jacket") explained the psychology of Elaine with the appearance of her gruff father. By Episode 9, where George attempted to take back a message he left on a phone machine, the show's irreverent attitude was firmly established.

The low-rated series then left the air for another couple months and returned in April of 1991 with some good bits (the first time we hear Elaine's "Get Out!") and some less interesting material (a statue is stolen, Jerry goes to a laundromat, George thinks he's having a heart attack). But it also included the now-famous half hour spent waiting in a Chinese restaurant.

By fall of 1991 the series settled into its Wednesday-night slot and the episodes gained momentum. Episode 22 featured a tough-talking library cop who pursued Jerry's 20-year overdo book, followed the next week by a half hour set in a mall parking garage. By early 1992 classic episodes

appeared with regularity, including “The Pez Dispenser,” “The Boyfriend” and “The Fix-Up” (which won the Emmy for Outstanding Comedy Writing).

The fourth season produced consistent winners, with plots ranging from Jerry and George selling a TV pilot to the irreverent treatment of a bubble boy. It was also the year of “The Virgin,” “The Junior Mint,” and “The Contest,” as well as an episode dealing with Jerry picking his nose in public.

It was during this creative peak that the series was permanently moved to Thursday nights. The mid-90s experienced a dramatic increase in viewers for many classic episodes, such as “The Puffy Shirt” and “The Soup Nazi,” which is so incredibly well written and performed that it just gets better with age.

After co-creator Larry David left the series, the eighth and ninth seasons contained some fun bits (Elaine’s dance moves or George getting smarter due to abstinence) but too many episodes didn’t measure up to previous seasons.

Characters at times became caricatures, such as in “The Dealership” where they all scream and flail their arms while Jerry tries to buy a car (it was the first original episode to air after NBC announced the show was going to end and was a poorly-timed disappointment).

Many plots in the final two years revolved around silly gimmicks, such as a meat slicer, a reverse peephole or the set from *The Merv Griffin Show*. At times the show’s writers seemed to be trying too hard, such as the backward episode “The Betrayal” or the forced catch phrase in “The Yada Yada” (which in reruns is more clever than funny). Classic scenes pop up in otherwise mediocre episodes—such as George’s answering machine message set to the theme from *The Greatest American Hero* contained in a silly plot where Elaine’s co-worker keeps calling her “Susie.”

The final season sputtered to the much-maligned finale. The series ended with an inconsistency that hadn’t occurred with previous sitcoms that are considered classics, such as *M*A*S*H* or *The Mary*



From left, Jason Alexander, Michael Richards, and Jerry Seinfeld from April 23, 1998 episode, “The Frogger”

Photo: NBC / Photofest, © NBC

Tyler Moore Show. Watching the show in daily syndication today just magnifies the unevenness that may not have been as noticeable when the original episodes aired once a week.

The four at the center of *Seinfeld* dealt with rage, bigotry and misogyny. The style of humor copied the Mel Brooks school of using macabre topics, including Nazism, as a source of humor. Violence and death resulted in hard-hearted punch lines and unsympathetic lead characters. The final episode that Larry David wrote before leaving the series was "The Invitations," a callused satire that had George's fiancé

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dropping dead after licking old wedding invitation envelopes while he walked away happy to be rid of her.

The soulless *Seinfeld* characters went beyond just being amoral to often being immoral without suffering any consequence (until the over-the-top finale, which seemed to mock the idea of restitution). Watching Jerry steal a loaf of bread from a little old lady ("The Rye") may be slapstick-funny in a writers' meeting but without some type of moral resolution at the end of the episode he came across more like Homer Simpson than a legitimate human being.

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Which leads to the biggest conclusion that I came to after watching the entire series: *Seinfeld* was a cartoon. It was not

meant to be real and almost begged the audience not to believe what the leads were getting away with. Jerry not only made frequent references to his desire to be a cartoon superhero, but his Superman doll was prominently displayed on his living room shelf. One of the last episodes in the final season was "The Cartoon," where Jerry revealed he had drawings of Lois Lane naked.

References to Clark Kent were made even more often than the show's fascination with the Kennedys. In 1994's "The Race," Jerry's girlfriend is named Lois, the theme song from the Superman movie is played when Jerry runs against an old schoolmate and *Seinfeld* ends the show quoting Superman as he turns to wink at the camera. The show's star was telling viewers that this whole thing was a fantasy.

Seinfeld was written to be unrealistic, with fake holidays, politically incorrect jokes and absurd contests. When George talked you could almost see the little bubble above the head of a depressed Charlie Brown. Kramer was like Wile E. Coyote, getting knocked down and bouncing back up with no long-term effect. It should be no surprise then that Jerry's follow-up project, years after the TV series went off the air, was an animated movie.

Seinfeld paralleled *The Simpsons* in revising the way audiences watch sitcoms. The pacing was quick-cut, with some scenes lasting only 15 to 20 seconds. Product brand names were integrated into plots. And both shows used humorously despicable people to mock current events.

So what will *Seinfeld*'s place be in television comedy history? Surprisingly, the *Seinfeld* legacy may come closest to the workplace setting of *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, a brilliantly written series that features four similar New York characters.

Jerry, like Van Dyke's television writer Rob Petrie, used his private life as inspiration for his comedy material. Short, pudgy joke-teller George was similar to *Van Dyke's* on-screen comedy co-writer Buddy. Man-hungry Elaine could be compared to Van Dyke spinster Sally (though Julia Louis-Dreyfus looks more like Mary Tyler Moore than Rose Marie). And instead of Kramer showing up at the door, Van Dyke had oddball assistant Mel Cooley. Even *Seinfeld's* odd fascination with the Kennedy clan compares to the Kennedy-family funded *Van Dyke Show's* comparison of leads Rob and Laura to first couple John and Jackie.

Ann Morgan Guilbert, who played neighbor Millie Helper on the Van Dyke Show, popped up years later playing the Florida neighbor of Jerry's parents in a couple *Seinfeld* episodes. Was the casting coincidental or was it an intentional homage to the earlier series?

Both *Seinfeld* and *Van Dyke* stumbled in early ratings and were almost cancelled, only to turn top ten when they were moved to different nights and placed behind hit shows. Both were highly honored by the industry and reflected the vision of a Jewish creator/writer (in Van Dyke's case it was Carl Reiner). And both stars decided to quit with their shows still on top (Van Dyke was ranked 16th when it left the air in 1966).

Van Dyke's show went into syndication and did fine for a number of years but rarely airs today. Is the same fate awaiting Jerry *Seinfeld*? Decades from now will his series become a relic only remembered by old timers? Will *Seinfeld* end up like *The Phil Silvers Show*, which was showered with Emmy awards and critical praise in the 1950s but is nowhere to be seen today? Or is it another *I Love Lucy*, which audiences are still watching 50 years later?

The answer may depend on the future state of the television sitcom. Historically

in every decade a new major hit sweeps the tube and revives the comedy genre. After *Lucy* there was a lull before *The Beverly Hillbillies*, which led to rural shows that were replaced by *All in the Family*. Then the sitcom almost died in the early 1980s before *The Cosby Show* started the resurgence in comedies that led to *Seinfeld*.

There have been no new major half-hour comedy success stories since Jerry left the air. Even *Friends* had one-fourth fewer viewers than *Seinfeld*, which remains the last series of any kind to attract at least twenty percent of the homes during the regular season.

For the past few years there has not been one traditional sitcom in the prime-time Nielsen top 15 list, which may explain why *Seinfeld* continues to do well in reruns. Prime-time television today lacks popular half-hour comedy programs that eventually feed the syndication market and the industry awaits the next big hit to revive the comatose sitcom genre.

Seinfeld may not quite deserve the title "the greatest TV show of all time," but it certainly was the last great situation comedy to attract a large audience. It will live on in reruns as long as it has no new competition and viewers fondly remember it as the last time a television show brought a nation together to laugh.

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