Jameson's Top Ten TV Shows of the 2009-2010 Season
by Jameson Simmons

This is how much I hate composing these lists: I'm always terrified I'm going to leave something out, and not realize it until after the list is published – it's my number one concern, especially with a TV list during a time when there are essentially five mini-seasons of television nestled within each calendar year. How am I supposed to remember all the different shows I watched?

Today I began composing a list of shows, just to get the ball rolling, and the first rough list came in at eleven shows – which made me think, "This might not be so difficult to winnow down, after all." Then I realized my list was missing *Louie*. After I'd just read three other lists adroitly extolling *Louie*'s virtues; after I'd just finished watching and enjoying *Louie*'s brilliant first season a week ago; after we'd debated for months whether *Louie* debuted early enough to qualify for this year's list. You see what I mean? This list-making stuff is bullshit! My brain's not made for it. How about I watch the TV I like and if you and I are talking about TV and you mention a show I like, I'll make a wide-eyed happy face – and if you mention a show I hate, I'll make a yucky, gagging face. I think that's the dignified way to handle it.

Also, doesn't it get a bit stale talking about the same shows, year in and year out? I love *30 Rock* and always will, but what can I add to what I've already said for three years and other people have already said all week? I genuinely admire Joe's ability to wax poetic about each year's crop (somebody should hire that guy, because, *man*, he writes well about pop culture in an accessible yet erudite, everyman-but-not-dumbed-down kind of way) and I'm awed by Brandon's ability to remember individual story lines and episodes, but – boy! – that isn't me. Not these days.

So this year I'm debuting a simple modular device, and we'll see how that works. (Also, I'm going to spend the opening 300 words talking exclusively about myself and see if that doesn't turn you off completely. How's it going?) Here's the list, presented in countdown format because that's what the kids like. (I'll again spoil the ending and tell you that *Dexter* is #1. I know, I – *me!* – said last year that *30 Rock* would always take the top spot, but I didn't count on John Lithgow. Nobody counts on John Lithgow.)

10. *Justified*, FX

Liked: Really excellent dialogue writing, through and through. The whole series just has a kickass, unique voice. It's created by Graham Yost (who, I pray to God, isn't related to Sid Yost), creator of *Boomtown* and *Speed*, and it's based on a short story by Elmore Leonard, who wrote *Get Shorty*. That combination of voice and energy is pretty much what jumps off the screen at you each week, along with great performances by Timothy Olyphant, Ned Searcy, and the enchanting Natalie Zea (appearing in the first TV show truly worthy of her inexhaustible talents). The whole ensemble of bit players is filled out with great people, and I'd be remiss to overlook Walton Goggins as the main antagonist. On top of all this, Olyphant's character, U.S. Marshal Raylan Givens, is a straight shooter – literally, and in the more figurative sense that he evaluates a situation and makes a cool, pragmatic determination about the right way to handle it, then proceeds accordingly. No matter what. It's refreshing, and he's fun to root for, even if he makes plenty of mistakes.

Didn't Like: In some cases, the show treads back and forth over the same territory. Givens's sore relationship with his father; his longtime struggle with the Goggins character, whom he grew up with; getting chewed out by his boss (Searcy) for one minor foul-up or another. (I mean, can you blame a guy for sleeping with Joelle Carter, even if she is a material witness?) And I admit I'm getting tired of watching M.C. Gainey smirk and lumber around as an evil criminal prick in any number of shows. (Not that he isn't great at it.)

9. *Psych*, USA

Liked: Dulé Hill and James Roday, being adorable and making me laugh my ass off week after week. It's strange: I'm a guy who will fight tooth and nail to prevent a movie like *The Hangover* from winning an Oscar for Best Picture, because I believe that we must honor filmmakers who take the craft seriously and work hard to do something meritorious with the art form, but when it comes to TV, I just want it to be fun. I can appreciate all the excellence that goes into "prestige" shows, but given the choice between spending an hour with Shawn Spencer or Matt Saracen, I will send that mopey punk packing every time. Anyway, I rave about this show every year, so I don't need to reiterate it: it's goofy, it's hilarious, and it's filled with non-sequiturs and pop culture references. I love it.

Didn't Like: They took away Shawn's girlfriend (Rachael Leigh Cook). That hurt – they were fun together. But really, there's nothing not to like about this show. Unless, for some reason, you hate awesomeness.

8. *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, HBO

Liked: The *Seinfeld* reunion! Are you kidding, people?! This was delivered in the most Larry David-y possible way, which was basically a fork in the eye of anyone who has spent the last decade whining for a *Seinfeld* reunion – which, if a person truly appreciated what *Seinfeld* was trying to do, is exactly what you were waiting for. Beautifully, however, the season managed to cover plenty of the usual uncomfortable topics, so it did not get wrapped up solely in the *Seinfeld* hype.

Didn't Like: I suppose it's a little sad they couldn't come up with funnier stuff to do with Michael Richards playing himself. Aside from the sparring between Seinfeld and Larry,

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which is always classic, the squabbles between Larry and Jason Alexander (who portrayed Larry's alter ego on the *Seinfeld* series) was really the best of the interactions between the cast members.

7. *Modern Family*, ABC

Liked: Really delivered on the "mockumentary" style in a fresh and entertaining way. I was prepared for this show to be a bore (in fact, I made fun of it mercilessly before it started for trotting out such tired scenarios as the aging dad getting squeamish about his gay son's boyfriend), but Steve Levitan and Christopher Lloyd have done an amazing job keeping the relationships unique and three-dimensional and keeping the documentary style from getting old, considering every other sitcom is doing some version of it these days. They're creating a well-rounded family, in which everyone has his or her good points and bad points, which not even a show as great as *Everybody Loves Raymond* would pull off consistently. But I guess the lion's share of the credit goes to Ty Burrell and Sarah Hyland, for performing Phil and Haley Dunphy so expertly that I absolutely hate them just as much as I'm supposed to.

Didn't Like: I suppose in a perfect world, guest appearances like those from Shelley Long, Fred Willard, and Benjamin Bratt might have been spread out over the first two seasons, rather than all wedged into season one. One of the things that works well about a good family sitcom is real, grounded stories about normal, everyday stuff. You don't want to get into big-concept stories any more often than you have to (though I admit I'm hypersensitive to this problem, having watched it destroy *The Simpsons* and, last season, bring *The Office* to the brink of ruin).

6. *Community*, NBC

Liked: Abed's constant bouncing off the fourth wall like the ropes of a wrestling ring. His bizarre, only-in-TV relationship with Troy, and the way they'd conspire to create those perfect little sketch-vignettes for the episode "tags" over the closing credits. Just about anything Pierce said, especially "Sausage Fest" and "Streets Ahead." The "Modern Warfare" episode, obviously, but you can't leave out "Contemporary American Poultry" with the chicken fingers, or "Debate 109" with Jeff and Annie, or any of the episodes with Jeff and Professor Slater. Or "Beginner Pottery" with Tony Hale *and* the valuable lesson that Jeff hates anything he can't successfully half-ass his way through. Or "Romantic Expressionism" – with Kickpuncher!

Didn't Like: I didn't like Jeff ending up with Brita instead of Slater. If there's one thing I've learned from *How I Met Your Mother* (Other than some shows should probably end after four seasons – I mean, *my ex-fiancée's ex-ex-husband wrote a movie about her jilting me at the altar and it's my new date's favorite rom-com*? Talk about your high-concept diversions! Okay, sorry...), it's that your main romance arc

should start in one direction and end in another. It's more interesting that way, and more like real life – you start off thinking you want one thing, but end up in a completely different direction. Other than that minor quibble, hard to find many flaws with *Community*, my most re-watched show of last year.

5. *Leverage*, TNT

Liked: The really, really excellent ensemble. Fans of Joss Whedon shows who haven't tried *Leverage* are absolutely missing out. This team of thieves-turned-secret-good-guys is just like the motley crew at the core of one of his shows, and their banter and skill sets are nearly as fresh and fun. I came to the realization this year that a lot of my cable favorites (*Leverage*, *Burn Notice*, *White Collar*) center around a similar theme of using wily trickery to convince bad guys to give themselves up or go away on their own, but one place where *Leverage* sets itself apart is its often unique setups. Rather than drug kingpins or human traffickers like you can find on any procedural show, they take a different angle on things: a hedge fund swindler, perhaps, or a war profiteer. It puts a subtle message behind some of the episodes. Also, if you're inclined towards behind-the-scenes stuff, series creator John Rogers answers questions about each episode in detail on his thoroughly enjoyable blog.

Didn't Like: The latest run of episodes (the show actually aired one and a half "seasons" in the eligibility time frame for this year's list) incorporated an odd external element where some shady underworld figure was manipulating the team into working certain jobs against their will. It seemed like an unnecessary addition in order to add a season-long arc atop the stories of the week, which had the whiff of network interference and never quite gelled with the normal working order of things. Fortunately, it was wiped away just as swiftly (and awkwardly) as it was introduced, so that's done with.

4. *Party Down*, Starz

Liked: Having established the ensemble of characters in season one, this season (after quickly establishing Megan Mullally, in to replace Jane Lynch) the show did a nice job of devoting an episode or two to a story focused mainly on each of the individual players in turn, rather than wrapping the whole thing around the romantic tension between Henry (Adam Scott) and the ceaselessly self-centered Casey (Lizzy Caplan) the way season one did. I also really like June Diane Raphael, who showed up toward the end playing a love interest for Ron Donald (Ken Marino) – she was great on *Flight of the Conchords*, and she was great in *Year One* (among little else). Obviously, Jimmi Simpson and Steve Guttenberg were fantastic. Also, I'm fairly pleased the show is not returning for a third season. It struggled to maintain a regular cast (likely a result of airing on Starz, a network with zero exposure), and I don't think it would've been possible to maintain consistent quality over a longer period with the

turnover working against them. Shows like *Fawlty Towers* and *The Office* (Gervais) went out in a two-season flash of brilliance – it's nothing to be ashamed of.

Didn't Like: Netflix content partner Starz, yanking the show from the Netflix Watch Instantly menu just a couple of weeks after season two ended and its cancellation was announced. What gives?

3. *Louie*, FX

Liked: The format, akin to NBC's original concept for *Seinfeld*: some stand-up footage, and then some quasi-related footage which might be an entire story, like the one where he spends a week alone while his daughters are with their mom, or it might be more like a little sketch, like when he chaperones a school trip. The experimental, stream-of-consciousness quality it sometimes has, like when Louie goes to the dentist, and has a dream under anesthesia that he meets Osama bin Laden and talks him out of terrorism, because 9/11 was "an asshole thing to do" (bin Laden "never thought of it that way"), and when Louie awakens it's pretty clear his dentist was molesting him. The "Travel Day" episode, which vented so much of my frustration with air travel (still plenty left though!). The stand-up itself, which is among C.K.'s best, with the benefit of being edited down to just the most worthy material. Mainly, though, the show offers an even purer version of what *Chappelle's Show* was aiming for: an opportunity to spend half an hour seeing the unvarnished world view of one of today's most original and outstanding comedians. If you just hate him (and some do – he's polarizing, like Chappelle or Sarah Silverman), then avoid it; otherwise, by all means, dive in.

Didn't Like: My new format is going to start exposing its flaws here at the end, as it is getting harder and harder to think of things I didn't like about TV's very best shows. (And, really, ten is a pretty small number these days. So many shows are doing such great things on TV.) I suppose if you twist my arm, I'd say that the show returned a few times too often to themes of sex, acceptance, and isolation. (Although, in ten years, when I'm his age, if I'm thinking about sex, acceptance, and isolation *half* as much as he is, I'll count myself lucky – so I shouldn't complain.)

2. *30 Rock*, NBC

Liked: Jon Hamm was back. Sudeikis was back. (As Brandon mentioned, they teamed up with Dean Winters to portray imaginary Jamaican dental assistants in a trio of Liz's past boyfriends.) Elizabeth Banks was marvelous, Dodecacil and all. Julianne Moore stopped by, donned a grating accent, and was still less obnoxious than she's ever been in any other screen role. Jack and Liz went to Stone Mountain – and it's always great when they're on the road together. Matt Damon showed up and introduced himself as Liz's perfect man in one 30-second monologue. Plus, I quite enjoyed the "give

America what it wants" episode, with the Hank Williams, Jr.-inspired song about semi-finals tennis, and the toss to the now-defunct *Jay Leno Show*.

Didn't Like: As much as I thought I could never get tired of shows (especially NBC shows) making light of the way NBC royally fucked up its *Tonight Show with Conan O'Brien* situation, I thought the "Khonani" episode was a little heavy-handed, with its metaphorical representation of the dispute in terms of Jack's promise to give two different janitors the same 11:30 work shift. That's the only thing I didn't love about *30 Rock* this year.

1. *Dexter*, Showtime

Liked: John Lithgow, as Dexter's greatest nemesis. How about the range on that guy? Once his career spanned *Garp*, *The Twilight Zone Movie*, *Terms of Endearment*, and *3rd Rock from the Sun*, we knew he could do anything and do it well, but if you watched *Dexter* this season, you saw him take it to a whole new level. Each season has focused on a different serial killer in the Miami area, and Dexter has been forced to come to terms with that killer, eliminating or containing him in some way. Lithgow, as the Trinity Killer, represents more than just an adversary whom Dexter must stop – he's also someone Dexter believes he can learn from in a different way than past cases. It's a fascinating dynamic, with some richly intriguing turns, and one astonishing twist with very compelling ramifications. I won't mention any specifics, because anyone who hasn't watched *Dexter* yet really should, and should experience it with as little foreknowledge as possible – that's the best way. (I know Joe spoiled it at the end of his list, but you could be forgiven if you didn't get to that part because you stopped reading and threw your computer out the window when you reached his laughable assertion that *Glee* was the seventh best show on TV last year. It didn't even crack the top ten Wednesday shows!) Also impossible not to like: Jennifer Carpenter as Debra Morgan, Dexter's sister by adoption. She's driven, and spunky, yet vulnerable – and profane as hell.

Didn't Like: This show doesn't make mistakes. I liked everything, and you will, too.