

OCT. 19, 2015

'Farts and Procreation' and the Transcendent Power of Silliness

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Pod-Canon is an ongoing tribute to the greatest individual comedy-related podcast episodes of all time

For people not on its peculiar wavelength (by which I mean, my wife), the curious, amorphous entity known as anti-comedy could easily pass for non-comedy, or terrible comedy. That's partially by design; anti-comedy is not supposed to be traditionally or conventionally funny. On the contrary, anti-comedy is designed to get audiences to reexamine their relationship with movies and television shows and Bazooka Joe comics that are supposed to traditionally or conventionally be funny. It is fundamentally deconstructionist in nature, which helps explain why it has historically appealed to people with a deep emotional and intellectual investment in comedy, who are interested not just in laughing or making other people laugh, but in examining the psychology and mechanics of funny business.

But from the outside, a truly transcendent anti-comedy can look an awful lot like a horribly failed attempt at comedy. Take, for example, the legendary first "Farts and Procreation" episode of Comedy Bang Bang. From a conventional comedy standpoint, the episode is something of a train wreck. The performers giggle throughout the podcast so extensively, "corpsing" in the vernacular, that "Farts and Procreation" almost feels like it has its own stoned laugh track. The episode is full of jokes that barely make sense, let alone qualify as jokes, dead space, flat, affectless performances, and improvisational tangents that descend into convoluted, complicated spirals that are borderline nonsensical and exceedingly difficult to follow even if you're paying close attention.

Another podcast might have tossed the whole episode out but not only did Comedy Bang Bang run the episode, it ran a sequel to the episode, and then a sequel to the sequel, and then another episode entitled "NOT Farts and Procreation 4" even after Harris Wittels' death, reasoning, correctly, that there is no better way to pay tribute to Wittels' extraordinary life than by releasing more of his glorious, life-affirming silliness. "Farts and Procreation" became one of Comedy Bang Bang's most beloved and fondly remembered institutions. It speaks to the glorious possibilities of the podcasting medium that seventy minutes of four singularly simpatico goofballs being silly could have produced such a shockingly substantial legacy, to the point where the mere words "Farts and Procreation" are liable to prompt a smile of recognition for Comedy Bang Bang cultists. The oddly deathless title comes from Scott Aukerman's suggestion for a title for a porn parody of Parks and Recreation and it should be noted that Aukerman is somehow far and away the most serious and least silly person on the podcast.

The episode is introduced by Aukerman as a tribute to Parks and Recreation featuring none of the people you'd actually want featured on such a tribute, like your Amy Poehlers or your Nick Offermans, but one that does feature two writers in Harris Wittels and Chelsea Peretti and an actor in Adam Scott.

The vibe from the get-go is loose to the point of being ramshackle and sloppy. The episode takes its tone from the very specific comedy of Wittels, who was the Andy Kaufman of the Comedy Bang Bang universe. They're both beloved, eccentric, divisive (and Jewish) figures who died in their early thirties and whose comedy was about a whole lot more than making people laugh. On "Farts and Procreation" Aukerman even teases a listener poll to determine whether Wittels should do a feature called "Foam Corner," a feature called "Phone Corner," one of his characters, or if Wittels should never come back, just as Dick Ebersol had audiences vote on whether Kaufman would be welcomed back on Saturday Night Live.

A really great, borderline dadaist Harris Wittels "Phone Corner" or "Foam Corner" inspires a sort of double laugh; you laugh at the joke itself, then at yourself for laughing at something so seemingly stupid, childlike and nonsensical, then it makes you think about why you were laughing in the first place.

A Foam Corner line like, "A lot of people ask me if I've tried to suck my own dick. And no, I haven't. Because I can't!", when posited as a joke forces audiences to think about what constitutes a joke in the first place. But the construction is only half of it; the other half is the halting delivery, giggly, halting and deliberately off.

That's even more true of the centerpiece of the episode, an extended improvisational segment where Wittels and Scott – whose persona and delivery are so similar that they almost come across more as doppelgängers than comic foils – inhabit the roles of Bryan and Jack, men who work in lumber and communicate in the same airless, bored monotone.

Just as a great "Foam Corner" joke succeeds as both a joke and a parody of a joke, the improvisation on "Farts and Procreation" doubles as a brilliant parody of improvisation. Wittels had previously introduced the character of "Jack," a lumberyard employee whose early appearances were, by Wittels' own admission, met with universal disdain.

That is all the more reason to bring him back and on "Farts and Procreation" he's joined by Adam Scott's Bryan, an equally dry lumberyard co-worker who initially appears to be almost perversely boring and uninteresting but ultimately reveals himself to have a private life of Caligula-like decadence.

It turns out that despite their dry, American Gothic exteriors and the "Christ, we're even boring ourselves" tone of their banter, the men are both involved in adulterous relationships with each others' wives, who, in a surreal turn of events, also happen to be their own sisters. So these two screamingly dull men are cheating on their wives with their own sisters, information that seems to surprise them as much as it does the audience.

"Farts and Procreation" flies off the rails in its opening moments, but rather than crashing it instead ascends to some crazy, rarified realm where the unfunny becomes screamingly funny and the more convoluted and painful a bit, the more entertaining it becomes.

It's a testament to the incredible chemistry of the assembled players that Aukerman went on to do stand-alone podcasts with two-thirds of the episode's guests. The seeds of Analyze Phish and U Talking U2 To Me were planted here, but its legacy is even greater than that. This is 70 minutes of insane goofing around that will live forever, an extended bit of silliness collectively created in the electric moment, destined to stand the test of time.