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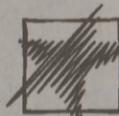
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## "Friends" at the end: Will fans see the likes of it again?

By Aaron Barnhart  
KRT CAMPUS

"Friends" has had more jump-the-shark moments in its 10-year run than any TV show ever. But they say what doesn't kill you makes you stronger, and "Friends" is proof of that.

After roaring back to life time and again, it gets to leave the airwaves this Thursday on its own terms. Ross, Rachel, Monica, Chandler, Phoebe and Joey may or may not be "friends to the end," but they certainly learned how to work together as negotiation partners.

Not only did each of them earn \$1 million for each of the last 18 episodes of this season, but they also were able to cancel their own show while it was still going strong and move on to new things. (Matt LeBlanc will star in "Joey," a spin-off comedy for NBC next season.)

The sendoff of "Friends" probably should have happened a year ago, but NBC executives were still waiting for "the next Friends" to come along, and they bribed the show's six stars to return for a final season full of clip reels and reruns. The gamble appears to have paid off. This abbreviated final season of odds-and-ends episodes has, strangely, been one of the better ones. And earlier this year, the "next Friends" finally arrived. Unfortunately for comedy fans, it's called "The Apprentice."

The demise of the hit sitcom and the onslaught of reality shows are worrisome trends. "Are Sitcoms Dead?" asked Entertainment Weekly. "Is 'Friends' the End?" was USA Today's more apocalyptic headline. Interesting questions, and we'll get to them in a moment. But first, let's dispel the false notion that underlies them — that "Friends" was just like all other sitcoms, only higher-rated and longer-lived.

Wrong. "Friends" was in a class and a league all its own. It was sitcom serendipity: outstanding actors combined with terrific writing and people at the helm who obviously had no intention of coasting once "Friends" became a monster megahit. Through all the ups and downs, journalists waited for a crack in the six actors' unified front. They're still waiting.

Meanwhile, "Friends" just continued to surpass expectations. Originally branded as a Gen-X comedy, it inspired a multitude of knockoffs. Even NBC tried other ensemble shows with hip young people hanging around drinking coffee.

"We had to make the point over and over that this was not a show for a generation," said David

Crane, the other co-creator of "Friends," in a recent conference call with reporters. "It was a universal show."

It's interesting to compare "Friends" with "Frasier," the other NBC comedy signing off this spring (May 13). Five years ago, if you were to have bet which show would be treated to a lavish farewell, you'd probably have picked "Frasier." Spun off from "Cheers" in 1993, it had an immediate impact on urban America and it was showered with Emmy awards early on, including best comedy series five years running, from 1994 to 1998.

But as "Friends" matured, it became a bigger hit and won Emmys, though not as many. That wasn't NBC's marketing prowess at work.

**"We had to make the point over and over that this was not a show for a generation. It was a universal show."**

— David Crane  
co-creator of "Friends"

Rather, it reflected the growing admiration for a program where people weathered the changes of life while valuing their friendships above all else — above lovers, above jobs, above petty annoyances.

Or compare "Friends" and "Everybody Loves Raymond," the show that will get the "Friends" treatment next season if its principals make good on their threat to quit "Raymond" in 2005. It's a classic comedy that depends heavily on comic pauses, much as the Norman Lear shows of the 1970s did. Laughs can be drawn out for 10 or 20 seconds if need be.

By contrast, "Friends" is a thoroughly contemporary show.

Using computers, its editors routinely remove laughter during post-production whenever the studio audience's live reaction slows down the show's allegro pacing.

"It is such an extraordinarily sophisticated show, and yet they make it look effortless," says Robert Thompson, the TV expert at Syracuse University. "I would argue that 'Friends' is good if you're half-asleep."

That probably explains why networks have been trying to create "the next Friends" for nearly the entire decade that the show has been on the air. Unlike the idiosyncratic "Seinfeld" or "Frasier," copying "Friends" doesn't seem like the hardest thing in the world to do. But it has proved impossible.

Many people have commented that it feels like the passing of an era, because networks are no longer churning out hit comedies. Instead, they're investing in reality shows, which don't require writers, are much cheaper to produce and deliver young, advertiser-friendly viewers in droves.

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