

Throwback Thursday: Cowboy Bebop (1998)

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By Michael Johnpoll

“I think it’s time we blow this thing / Get everybody and the stuff together / OK, three, two, one, let’s jam.”

From the moment the theme song starts, you know you’re watching an episode of the Japanese television series, Cowboy Bebop. It’s anime, part jazz, part space opera, and just plain cool.

Cowboy Bebop is a once in a decade kind of show; it let’s an audience in, avoids falling into any demographic or specific genre trap, and wants to be accessible to everyone. It follows the story of the “Bebop” spaceship crew on their day-to-day job: being pretty crappy bounty hunters.

Unlike many other shows, the audience doesn’t need much, if any, knowledge of science fiction, bounty hunting, or Japanese culture to follow along. There aren’t culture-specific references to follow and the story lends itself to a sense of internationalism that spreads to the year the show is set in, 2071.

Most locations and words for simple ideas are still based on eastern cultural ideas and technology from out of the 90s, but read true with any viewer. For instance, a space ship breaking down may relate to your own experience of your car sputtering out on the way to work.

Like other works produced by director Shinichiro Watanabe, which include Samurai Champloo, Kids on the Slope, and Space Dandy, Cowboy Bebop breaks from the generally accepted tropes and methods of producing a show. Instead, it produces a world that relies on highly-stylized animation and realistic characters with their own nightmares, problems, dreams and situations.

This show goes quite a bit deeper into development, character, and setting than other animated television airing at the time including, South Park, the Wild Thornberrys and Outlaw Star.

Of the 26 episodes, our “heroes” Spike Spiegel (former Yakuza) and Jet Black (former detective) spend time wondering how to pay for repairs for their ship and where they can find their next

meal. Being bounty hunters with morals hurts their ability to eat. Being farther along in the future doesn't promise food, just stranger chances to earn your butter and bread for the day.

The characters are real, the setting is well-built, and the terrors facing the crew at the end of the line are many and deadly. Unlike any work before, and perhaps unlike any work since, "Cowboy Bebop" captured a moment in the lives of these characters and welcomed us in as willing observers. Not only would I recommend this show, but I extend to it the full 5 out of 5 Hats in review.