

John from Cincinnati and Post-9/11 Bible Studies

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The Sopranos may be the biggest and arguably the best show HBO has ever brought to television. I was playing catch-up back in 2007 before the airing of the second half of its final season. Airing moments after the series finale of *The Sopranos*, a weird and interesting new show was set to take HBO into a new era, but *John from Cincinnati* was doomed from the moment Joe Strummer and the Mescaleros' "Johnny Appleseed" started.

How HBO thought following up David Chase's heavily atmospheric gangster drama with a breezy, supernatural dramedy about spirituality and surfing just minutes after fans' reactions to that *Sopranos* finale is beyond me. The only thing the two shows share in common is the resilience of their strong performing female leads: Rebecca De Mornay as Cissy Yost and Edie Falco as Carmela Soprano. Imagine your favorite show of the past 7 years closing on something of a dark, ambiguous puzzle and then being brought to sun-filled sandy beaches in Imperial Beach, California where, lo and behold, you have more puzzles to decipher. *Sopranos* fans were likely walking into *John from Cincinnati* angry and despondent that this was the show set to take over their precious *Sopranos* timeslot.



David Milch, creator of *Deadwood* and *NYPD Blue*, even threw fans of his shows a curveball with *John from Cincinnati*, which was a departure from the grit they were used to from a show bearing his name. Co-creating the show with one-time *Deadwood* collaborator Kem Nunn, the show seemed more like a baffling quirky character study—comparably speaking, it’s the SoCal version of *Twin Peaks*. Characters in both shows behave whimsically, like drug dealers listening to opera in their cars who care about the ailing family of the man they sell their drugs to; a bird conveys its thoughts to its owner much in the way that a woman might converse with a log; an internet café is a good stand-in for the Double R Diner; a run-down motel acts like The Great Northern Hotel, where strange occurrences seem to bring many of the characters together.

The heart of *John from Cincinnati* is the dysfunctional, broken Yost family who, on the arrival of phrase-repeating John (Austin Nichols), begin to reconnect and heal. In some ways, Nichols’s character feels very similar to Peter Sellers’s Chance the gardener in *Being There*. Both are eccentric and simplistic, arriving in situations that require care and yet also helping the people around them. As John’s and the Yosts’ lives become more intertwined, more people seem to gravitate to them, becoming involved in their story and being drawn into the central location of the show: The Snug Harbor Motel.

John from Cincinnati starts weird with an interaction between John and Linc Stark (Luke Perry). John appears, as if out of nowhere, while Mexican immigrants find their way across the border behind him. “The end is near,” John tells Linc, and it will take most of the season for the audience to learn what that means. Linc ultimately puts together that John is “the end” and he is standing “near” Linc, but that reveal only begs more questions. There is a lot going on from the first few minutes of the show, and not paying attention at any time in any episode can cost you pieces of the puzzle. When the show aired back in 2007, I’d always re-watch the episodes and find new connections. I’ve seen the show multiple times now and I’m still catching new things, even thirteen years later.



Linc Stark arrives on that beach to appeal to Mitch Yost (Bruce Greenwood) by allowing him permission to sign his surf prodigy grandson, Shaun (Greyson Fletcher), to a sponsorship with his Stinkweed brand. Mitch recognizes Linc as the responsible party that allowed his son/Shaun's father Butchie (Brian Van Holt) into the lifestyle of an addict. Mitch is told to "Get back in the game" by John, and when Mitch asks Linc, "Is he with you?" the audience, looking for a clue, can recognize we have our hero and our villain showing up in the same place at the same time in an angel versus devil or light versus dark dichotomy. Luke Perry should also be recognized for his criminally under-acknowledged role in *John from Cincinnati*. The late actor was absolutely brilliant in his portrayal of the cutthroat, greedy, capitalist-incarnate Linc Stark, operating him at a level where you despise his manipulative nature but continually enjoy watching the character.

Mitch steps on a needle while walking to his car, and from then on Mitch randomly levitates. The show becomes blatantly Biblical, though religion never gets jammed down the viewer's throat because these events take place in the modern age—hell, there's enough violence, swearing, and sleaze in this version of John to make the Pope blush. But it is an interesting setup to see these Jesus-era characters and events written into modern-day storytelling and seeing the "what if" surrounding Joseph, Mary, John the Baptist, Mary Magdalene, and Jesus as people living today and not as just a 2,000-year-old interpretation. These are imperfect people living in an imperfect time, witnessing modern miracles, all connected, it would seem, by nature.

We witness the beauty of nature interacting with the Yosts through the ocean, of course, but also before and after Shaun's accident with Zippy, one of Bill's (Ed O'Neill) birds. During an interaction with Zippy, Shaun resuscitates the bird; later Zippy revives him in the hospital during Bill's "Hail Mary" attempt at saving Shaun's life after suffering a broken neck at a surfing competition—Lazarus be damned. And it isn't a

preposterous idea to see Mitch meditating and consider his path to enlightenment working in tandem with nature, especially where Mitch pleads in PSA promo ads for the show for an end to illegal sewage dumping, calling the ocean is his church, his sanctuary.



There's also a very interesting scientific aspect to the actions of the characters in the show being based on Sir Isaac Newton's Third Law of Motion: for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. Waves break in and they crash back out.

Mitch catches a good wave.

Mitch wipes out.

Mitch wipes out Cissy.

Cissy shows Butchie how to do that.

Cissy wipes Butchie out.

Butchie hurts Barry's head.

Mister Rollins comes in Barry's face.

My Father runs the Mega Millions.

It is very butterfly effect in general: one tiny act can cause a ripple effect that affects the world. And I often wonder where this was going in terms of making it a surfing metaphor, with John's constant attempts to get Mitch and Butchie Yost back in the game, as if this small butterfly-flap chain reaction might somehow save

the world. That last line of John's father running the Mega Millions also serves as the end of the ripple as it resonates back to its point of origin. Not only is John saying that his father has the power to make Barry (Matt Winston) a millionaire, but he also initiated a way for the characters to return to each other (and not in a *Lost* "we created this island" sort of way). Barry buys the motel where Mister Rollins's ghost and Butchie reside. Barry has to face his ghosts and Butchie now is forced to deal with his parents. Mitch Yost should get back in the game, closure can be found, and the ripple can calm.



So, what was the point of it all? I don't think we'll ever know where the show was headed, but to understand where it was coming from, you'd have to take yourself back to that post-9/11 era of war in Afghanistan and Iraq and that helpless feeling in the aftermath of the falling towers. From the first episode, we learn that the new owner of the motel has had a terrible tragedy in this place and seeks to cleanse the place of its ghosts. More and more people become drawn to the Snug Harbor Motel either by pilgrimage or just showing up at the location looking for ways to help the Yosts. The motel becomes symbolic of how people from miles away volunteered at Ground Zero during the devastating aftermath of 9/11, drawing people from everywhere to come help. It's not unlike how a star may have guided three wise men (Willie Garson, Luis Guzmán, and Matt Winston) to Bethlehem, though now they're running the inn. Doctor Michael Smith (Garret Dillahunt), and drug dealers, Freddie (Dayton Callie) and Palaka (Paul Ben-Victor), begin orbiting around or staying as well, observing and assisting in ways that seem counter-intuitive, at least in Freddie's case, knowing that something special is taking place and they need to be a part of it. And similar again to the way a ripple in the water starts from a droplet and becomes a reverberating wave, more people become drawn to the motel by the presence of John, something I think would have continued in Season 2 as the motel would continue its rebuilding efforts and slowly fill up.

When John shows himself in front of a black sheet with a stick figure on it saying, “Shaun will soon be gone,” it stirs fear in the hearts of Shaun’s loved ones. It’s very reminiscent of the al-Qaeda terrorism videos made during that time and sparks thoughts in the Yosts’ minds about who the hell John even is. It’s easily seen that after his return, this was John’s way of asking for permission, or more like telling the Yosts that he was taking Shaun away, but in the moment the action is threatening. The lesson here is more one of understanding than one of fear. We live on a small rock in the middle of space, and we all have a communication problem on this planet. Racism is represented throughout the show between Butchie’s views on Tina’s (Chandra West) choice of film costars, Joe’s (Jim Beaver) take on Mexican immigration, and also in a particular phrase of Joe’s referring to Muslims “going to get themselves blown off the planet.”



John repeats many unkind things the characters around him are saying when he asks, “if my words are yours, can you hear my father?” I believe many questions are being asked at the same time: if I repeat your words back to you, are you appalled by those words? John acts like a small child when he’s repeating the words of the other characters, almost acting like this is what the next generation might hear. When he repeats that Muslims are “going to get themselves blown off the planet,” it’s almost as if a child is repeating the hateful speech of their parents, and it makes a valid point in the argument that these notions of hate are learned because a child takes the word of a parent as gospel. Shaun is brought back unharmed after the pair’s secret trip to “Cincinnati,” and by the end of the show concession and forgiveness are made on many sides.

Linc helps the Yosts out of a jam and is asked to “get in the game” by John. The invitation to Linc to join the Yosts is really a fantastic metaphor for what *John from Cincinnati* is about: hope and forgiveness. John is riding down the boulevard to the pier with someone who was once his enemy, he recognizes the faces of the “vatos” on the street that stabbed him and left him for dead, he changes the mind of the most suspicious ex-

cop who gets detained for his efforts, and most importantly he unifies a family through the healing power of community. Jesus didn't change his world on his own—he had disciples, he had help. And the Yosts, like New York City, are not fixed by the end of the series; they're working on recovering and getting stronger together.

There's also the matter of John asking Cass (Emily Rose) to capture everything with her camera, as if asking her to spread the good word and write a gospel through the modern medium. And what is it Cass captured on that camera? John walking through an international festival, smiling with people, dancing to their cultural songs, and getting in a wrestling ring with a luchador and hugging him instead of fighting him. The message is simple if you can see the world the way John sees it—the way a child might.



John from Cincinnati is a beautiful, weird, and transcendent 10 episodes that to this day gets overlooked as “the show that came on after *The Sopranos*.” The fact is that the series was judged too harshly in 2007 when it was likely ahead of its time. This is the type of show that would likely have been cheered in the streaming era because of its interconnectivity and the depth of its characters. The show boasts a fantastic cast and a wonderful continuing story where every episode somehow deepens the mystery surrounding who John is by revealing pieces to the puzzle. We never do find out what was planned for 9/11/14, or if that relates to John being “the end,” or even what John actually is, and I suspect we never would have had the show continued. He could have been anything: a horseman of the apocalypse or a fallen angel, an extraterrestrial or a shapeshifter.

In the words of John, there are some things I know and there are some things I don't. Many questions go unanswered and many set-ups for a second season were made but never realized—including a pregnancy for Cissy, Kai (Keala Kennelly) becoming the mother of God, the mysticism around the Snug Harbor Motel

Bar, if the El Camino guy that spoke a lot like John was his father, and what the shuffleboards signify. I can make some guesses based on the clues, but I never think there's enough evidence.

The grace the show proposes we have in the face of tragedy and the measuring of ourselves to say what we mean with kindness in our hearts will forever be its message and legacy in my eyes. Even now—in the muddied political climate that we currently find ourselves in, where the United States has never been more divided and people mistake sides of the aisle for religious conviction without the consideration that people's opinions and ideals have to be considered—the show serves as a reminder to communicate. *John from Cincinnati* was a big believer in perspective and having an open enough heart to welcome people into our lives and not cast them out. As we ride one wave out of 2020 and catch the one into 2021, I think it's important to keep our faith in people. You never know whose father may be running the Mega Millions.

John from Cincinnati is now streaming on HBOMax.