

Cartoon Catharsis: In Defense of the Venture Bros

by James Hart

You know what? I never much cared for *Scooby-Doo*.

I know, I know. Pop culture blasphemy. I realize this offends more than a handful of my generation's nostalgic sensibilities, but I don't care, the show sucks.

Mind you, I've seen plenty of episodes. My folks were both nine-to-fivers and tried desperately to keep alive their social life, so growing up, our 21-inch Zenith Behemoth often doubled as my babysitter. I spent many winter nights hanging out with Hanna Barbera and a bag of Funyuns. But I just couldn't get into the show. I didn't *care* about the damn mysteries, okay? I found Shaggy's dope-induced paranoia as tiresome as Fred's Rube Goldberg contraptions and Daphne's utter worthlessness. And you'd think that the gang would start to recognize a rubber mask and fog machine after the first dozen they came across.

To be fair, it wasn't just *Scooby-Doo*; I took issue with the entire cartoon lineup. *Johnny Quest*? Nothing but a spoiled white kid who tagged along on his father's superscience adventures, pet bodyguard and Indian boy always in tow. And it's beyond ludicrous that no one could figure out Hong Kong Foey's secret identity, he's the only dog in the entire show.

Johnny gets rescued and his dad saves the day, G.I. Joe foils Cobra's nefarious schemes, Scooby and company solve the case, season after season. No variety in any of these cartoons, no *risks*. As I grew older, I started to think up hypotheticals for my weeknight cartoon companions: if Scoob and the gang are such shit-hot detectives, then why don't they go to work on the Zodiac crimes, or team up with Robert Stack on *Unsolved Mysteries*? And with so many kidnappings and frivolous henchmen deaths he bore witness to, how is it that little Johnny never developed post-traumatic stress? Wouldn't it be more

interesting — wouldn't it be *hilarious* — to see just where he'd end up in twenty years' time? Call me sick, but watching the washed-up ex-boy-adventurer attend group therapy for his manic depression would be not just funny, but damn near cathartic.

Frowning at my flickering television so many moons ago, I could never believe I'd actually get my wish.



Flash forward a couple decades later, when *Family Guy* begins to grace us with its outlandish hilarity on Fox prime time. *The Simpsons* were still going strong, and although their movie had yet to debut, *Scooby-Doo's* live action trainwreck had just made it to DVD. Home on summer break from college and the only soul awake in the house past six, I began to reacquaint myself with my old friend, our Zenith SL2. Following the habit of my childhood, I tuned immediately to Cartoon Network. But it wasn't *Space Ghost* or *G.I. Joe* I saw on the screen; what I saw knocked me on my ass.

It was Rusty Venture, has-been boy adventurer turned middle-aged disappointment. He was holding a yard sale on the Venture family compound, selling his father's superscience crap for some pocket money. Supervillains and heroes alike show up to browse his junk, including Venture's nemesis, the Mighty Monarch, whose powers entail, well, who knows. While the Monarch's henchmen argue passionately over who would win in a fistfight between Lizzie Borden and Anne Frank, he breaks into the Venture home with his girlfriend, Dr. Girlfriend. There they commit various atrocities in the name of supervillainy, such as breaking some lab stuff and lighting up his bathroom.



So far, *The Venture Bros* have been on the air for four seasons. The show beautifully illustrates every what-if scenario I always wanted to see in the old cartoon classics, with a style of humor I'm surprised the FCC hasn't made illegal. The show began as a parody of *Johnny Quest*, but over time it developed a life of its own and Johnny himself began popping up as a separate character. To my demented satisfaction, he appears as every bit the washed up, strung-out junkie I always imagined him to be. But of course, my favorite episode is the one in which Fred, Daphne, Velma and Shaggy are portrayed as the cartoon personae of Ted Bundy, Patty Hearst, Valerie Solanas and David Berkowitz.

Yeah.

Obviously, the show holds special interest for those with the sickest of sensibilities, but it's a brilliant farce of every pre-Internet era cartoon we're all supposed to love. It also references a plethora of pop culture staples, current and ancient-old: when the writers all but exhausted every possible allusion to David Bowie, they just went ahead and made him a regular character. (Guess who *his* henchmen are.)

Show creators Jackson Publick and Doc Hammer have said that more than anything else, *The Venture Bros* is about failure. *Everybody* sucks at their job, yet they remain oblivious to their own inadequacies or continue on despite them. This perspective has made me feel more like a super hero than anything Marvel or DC have been able to produce. I strongly urge anyone who's seen one *Scooby-Doo*, *Johnny Quest* or *Space Ghost* episode too many to check it out. I think you'll find its nostalgia-sacrilege and endless pop culture references oddly satisfying.