

Daily Journal

"Be just and fear not."



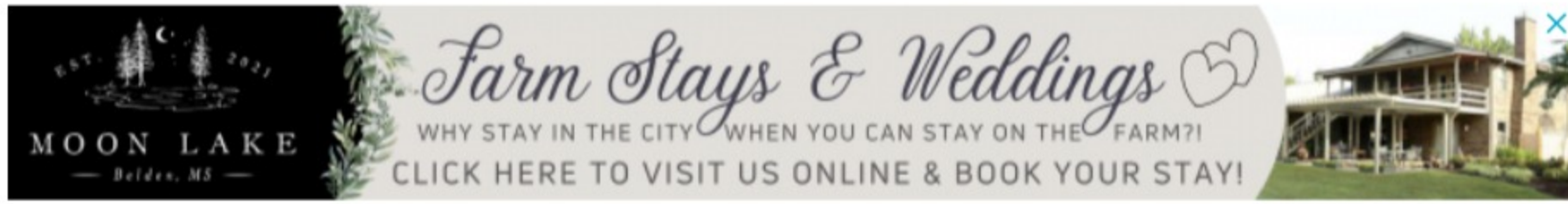
RILEY MANNING: Watching classic TV with modern lens an experience

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Every night, after the dishes are done and the dogs get quiet, my wife and I settle in to watch an episode or two of the 1982 sitcom "Cheers." By now, we have almost a Pavlovian response to that iconic opening jingle, which instantly calms our busy minds.

"Cheers" takes place almost exclusively in a Boston basement bar run by the now-sober owner Sam Malone (Ted Danson), a former Boston Red Sox pitcher who drank himself out of baseball. Other characters include tough-talking waitress Carla Tortelli (Rhea Perlman), beer-swilling accountant Norm Peterson (George Wendt), and resident odd-ball Cliff Clavin (John Ratzenberger).



Despite a slow start, "Cheers" became a regular in the top-10 highly rated TV shows in the U.S., running for a total of 11 seasons.

It's not hard to imagine why. 1982 found the U.S. preoccupied with an exciting yet uncertain future. "E.T. the Extraterrestrial" and "Blade Runner" hit the box office that summer. Disney opened its futuristic tech-driven EPCOT park. Time Magazine's person of the year was the computer. At the same time, unemployment peaked at over 10 percent, the highest since the Great Depression. A protest against nuclear weapons attracted more than 750,000 attendees to Central Park. President Ronald Reagan hiked up Cold War tensions by taking a strong foreign policy stance against Soviet attempts at expansion. The Center for Disease Control released its first case definition for the AIDS virus.

The whole thing makes you want to hole up with some affable familiars and just kick back for a while. The bar itself is reminiscent of a bunker. It's no wonder why series like "Cheers" are enjoying a renaissance on streaming services today.

Yet it's always an experience to watch a classic show with a modern lens. In a society that is much more conscious of mental health, Sam and Diane's constant will-they-or-won't-they jibes read as toxic codependency. You wonder what Norm's wife is doing while he's shutting down the bar every night. Carla's plight as a poor, perpetually pregnant single mother has a little more bite to it. The double standards for men and women around their promiscuity seem so obvious that it almost becomes commentary in today's MeToo landscape.



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Are my wife and I parsing these matters out at 10 o'clock every night? Hell no. We're basking in the blue-screen glow of its easiness, its reliability.

You can count on Sam to hound after vapid women. You can count on Cliff to drone on about his vacation to Florida. You can count on the whole bar to shout "NORM!" when Norm walks through the door. In general, folks seem more easy-going than they are now.

Time and consequence work differently in "Cheers." The show can jump months ahead in a single commercial break. Rarely do the events of one episode affect the next. Hardly anything changes significantly. As viewers, we only see the slice of these characters' lives that happen within the bar – just the tip of the iceberg, really. Their problems, their darkneses, that all happens off-screen, where nobody knows their names and nobody cares.

Someone once wrote that tragedy is underdeveloped comedy, that comedy is an abundance of life. Shakespeare or sitcoms, that is the truth.

