

Ego an Arduous Carousel in Documentary 'Harmontown'

Submitted by [NickHC](#) [1] on October 31, 2014 - 12:02pm

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Rating: **2.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – Dan Harmon does not look very good in his documentary “Harmontown,” which is probably why he agreed to the project. The creator of NBC’s cult comedy “Community” is presented wantonly in this documentation of his tour across America to interact with his fans through live recordings of his podcast “Harmontown.” Director Neil Berkeley (2012’s “Beauty is Embarrassing”) has created a different yet lacking type of tour film, as it whittles a revered showman to a representation of his polarizing elements; of the self-loathing narcissism that defines Harmon.

The spectacle of Berkeley’s film is Harmon’s podcast, which aside from Harmon’s GoPro & mirror confessions, provides a physical representation of what being inside Harmon’s head is like. As Harmon comes to comedic life by sauntering onstage to be his unapologetic self for an enthused crowd, he interacts with co-host (and actor) Jeff B. Davis, who makes Harmon look like a walking dive bar with health code violations in comparison. With gelled hair and constantly sharp outfits, Jeff fulfills the TV show creator’s business side, the aspects that led Harmon to create a popular non-cable comedy show post-“The Office,” and continue to garner a fan base. By no coincidence, Jeff provides the podcast recordings with its scant sense of order; he’s not the one who drinks as much as he may want to on stage, that’s Harmon’s job.

The other half of Harmon that identifies with the social outcasts in his cult-like crowd is represented by sidekick Spencer Crittenden. As the legend goes, Spencer went to a “Harmontown” recording one night with simple interest in playing his beloved “Dungeons & Dragons” with Harmon and crew; since then he has become dungeon master to this beloved reoccurring event, which finds Spencer with the same on-stage visibility as Harmon. When Spencer walks on stage to become dungeon master for the role-playing game, he often gets as much applause as Harmon, if not more.



'Harmontown'

Photo credit: *The Orchard*

Like the film that documents it, Harmon's podcast recordings are not a display of his talents, but a wallowing in its show-runner's sponsored mess. He equates the potential pilot script rewrites waiting for him during the tour to "homework," and he tackles his on-stage work in the same slacker-esque method - until the very last minute, when he is on stage and cannot BS anymore. While putting himself into this situation, he sticks to what he knows - talking about himself - and interacts with the audience for emotional endeavors either serious or sad. The results are tepid; Harmon is not a trained stand-up, at least in this form, and his casual banter provides testy anti-comedy more than an accidental success. A testament to his previous comedic achievements, Harmon is only required by the audiences that sometimes sell out his recordings to show up. It becomes a symbiotic relationship between grateful fans devotees and a calamitous ego that proves to be questionably healthy.

Berkeley presents Harmon's fans without names, banding celebrities like Sarah Silverman and Jack Black with off-the-street folk in their synonymous appreciation for Harmon's work. These enthusiastic offerings only get the film so far, as "Harmontown" lacks the ingredient that converts people into loving Harmon's work. Outsider artist documentaries are the closest comparison for Harmon's doc, but those distinctly conjoin observations on unusual characters with a visceral appreciation of their work. Harmon's past work in general is only expressed briefly in flashbacks, (shoutout to the long lost "Heat Vision and Jack") but there is still a missing image on Harmon's craft, the life source that got him on these stages in front of these adoring fans. A lack of focus in what jazzes his paid profession creates a pointlessly non-spectacular image of a revered performer whose static presence makes an ego seem progressively cheap. Berkeley's impaired choice creates incomplete math for Harmon as well - if he's only drunk-guy amusing at most during his podcasts, why should this interest be applied to the sympathizing about the pilot scripts he won't write, or the show that he created a cult following with, yet one not big enough to stay on the air?



'Harmontown'

Photo credit: The Orchard

For those who are already into Harmon or his podcast or even "Community," Berkeley's film is not fan service, but it flirts with becoming so when relying on the emotional effect Harmon's work can have on one's life. Its most stable element is its emotional pull, which features numerous moments of fans anxiously talking to him after his shows, wanting to share how a certain character he created spoke to them directly. The emotions in this film can run high enough that this movie becomes more like cult material, although it's only for those who are already members, not outsiders.

At the end of a tour that can't boast much of a narrative direction, Harmon tries to cutely claim that he's the villain of his own story. With this twee need for either positive or negative attention, Harmon becomes an arduous protagonist with a tiresome charm, especially as he proves himself to not be much of a hard-worker on-or-off stage, or even an interesting presence in the same mediums. Nudging that what's on stage may be a fading projection, "Harmontown" becomes the shrill spectacle of an ego that has become a carousel, electrified by adoration for past times in which he did something outside of his head.

"Harmontown" opens at Chicago's Music Box on October 31, with two Q&A sessions with Dan Harmon and a live podcast recording scheduled on November 1. Featuring Dan Harmon, Jeff B. Davis, Spencer Crittenden, Erin McGathy, Jack Black, Ben Stiller, Sarah Silverman, Joel McHale, Alison Brie, Gillian Jacobs, Danny Pudi, Yvette Nicole Brown, Alison Brie, Ken Jeong, Donald Glover, and Jim Rash. A documentary directed by Neil Berkeley. Not Rated.



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By [NICK ALLEN](#) [14]

Editor & Staff Writer

HollywoodChicago.com

nick@hollywoodchicago.com [13]

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