

Episode 2: Jackass Forever and Ever Amen

So, I know we did a Jackass episode already. I know that. But hear me out... when I wrote it, I did caveat the whole thing by saying that there was a 75% chance I was thinking about early 2000s MTV phenomenon Jackass at any given moment. While I hoped that finally committing the thoughts I have about the franchise to audio would mean that I would have a moment's peace, this has not turned out to be the case.

It did not help that they rudely decided to release a new movie. Jackass Forever was released in February. It's now April, and true to form, I have thought about it every day since seeing it. Johnny Knoxville has become some sort of charismatic, salt and pepper Peter Pan. Pontius is still in a thong. Steve-O has new teeth, but the rasping voice of man who spent much of his youth abusing substances. And I am what I am. Like a moth to a weird, but very appealing flame I am powerless to stop thinking about Jackass.

So, like... we're doing that today. Again. There'll be a new angle. Probably. Shut up, I'm not apologising. I'm not sorry.

I'm Alex – this is Pop Culture Boner, the podcast edition, and today I'm thinking about Jackass Forever.

Ok, so as I was preparing to write about this, I was re-reading one of my

favourite short pieces on Jackass by Joseph Earp called Jackass has always been deeply, deeply queer. It unpacks the show's queerness and its approach to subversion and camp. The whole piece is great and I recommend reading it, but the thing that's kicked me off is in the last paragraph. He says, "Essentially, when you talk about Jackass, what you're really talking about is yourself; about what you want from cinema, and art more generally, and life. Such is the power of a group of guys standing in a circle, watching a man shove his mouse-costumed dick into a snake pit, his eyes firmly shut, waiting for the bite."

When you take it out of context, it sounds like a really overblown a bizarre way to describe a show that is not insignificantly focused on being deliberately hit in the dick as hard as humanly possible. But it's true. One of the delightful things about packing and unpacking continuing to unpack and mentally rearrange Jackass is that I have 4,000 different thoughts on how to approach it every time I watch. In the last episode we did, I looked at the backdrop of crumbling 2000s American suburbia that facilitated its success, as well as its queerness and its proximity to high art, even as it remains decidedly low art.culture. I even took a stab at why I thought it was enduringly successful. And honestly, after watching Jackass Forever I could probably talk about all

of those things again from a different angle. Like I immediately left the cinema and re-read an essay on the aesthetics of American design standards and their prevalence in YouTube videos, specifically so I could mentally re-approach the aesthetics of the settings for Jackass stunts, and re-evaluate my initial perceptions of Jackass' influence on the YouTube generation. The article is called *The American Room* and it's by Paul Ford, in case anyone was wondering.

But I digress – my point is: whatever you are finding in Jackass is whatever you are looking for. Which is kind of fascinating in and of itself but I thought I should probably stick with one thing. Despite my love of a suburban aesthetic, the main piece I kept coming back to after watching Jackass Forever was their agetime. There's been 22 years between Johnny Knoxville first zapping himself with pepper spray, and the bodily-fluid laden cinematic experience that is the fourth film. And I'm kind of obsessed with the way that the passage of time has changed how mainstream audiences understand Jackass as a whole, and how the cast and crew of Jackass understand themselves in their middle age. So, I thought we could dig into it a little bit. If you haven't listened to the first Jackass episode yet, and you're like "what do you mean proximity to high art?" it's season 1, episode 25. It might be worth listening to first for some context if you're not an already-established Jackass scholar. Or don't. I can't tell you what to do.

One of the things that struck me about Jackass Forever was its almost universally positive reviews. It has an 86% rating on Rotten Tomatoes and at the more

hysterical end, critics are throwing around words like "masterpiece". Now, if you lived through the original wave of Jackass you're aware of the stark contrast there. While it wasn't without its supporters, critics were mostly throwing around words like "idiotic" and "dangerous". The hysterical end of the criticism during the show's initial TV run was former US Senator Joseph Lieberman campaigning to have it pulled from the air to protect the children from the onslaught of cock and ball torture. Those weren't his exact words, but I can only imagine that he was worried about the dicks. Obviously, it's not unusual for audiences to love and adore a thing that critics hate. Hindsight is 20/20 – it's difficult to recognise a moment while you're living it, so weird or subversive media usually resonates with audiences long before critics are able to point to its importance.

Part of me wonders whether this softening of opinions is a by-product of the obvious signs of ageing in the cast. I mean I think it's also a by-product of the ageing of critics – the MTV generation grew up and nostalgia reigns supreme. But age it's kind of thematically present throughout most of the film. In one of the opening stunts, Knoxville whips around to face the camera and says "You're not filming my bald spot are ya!?" to laughs from the crew. Later, when he's pinned to the ground by the weight of his cast mates for a bit where they transform into human stunt ramps, Jeff Tremaine comes up and sprays the faint thinning patch with black spray paint to blend into his meticulously dyed hair. Throughout the rest of the film, Knoxville alternates between a full head of black dye and a natural salt and pepper grey that he apparently grew out when

the filming paused for COVID lockdown at the beginning of 2020. The set up is a great example of a thing that I don't think Jackass ever really gets enough credit for, which is clever editing that weaves in something poignant with something resoundingly stupid. Two shots later an almost 50-year-old Knoxville, lying on his back, hits an almost 50-year-old Wee Man in the nuts. Wee Man doubles over and immediately drops the heavy plank he's holding straight onto Knoxville's face. It's a short snippet of great physical comedy positioned against a deliberate reminder of the passage of time.

The remainder of the film is a similar exercise in contrasts, complete with new fresh-faced cast members standing in next to the veterans. Knoxville is dressed the same as he would have been in 2002 – a pair of straight leg Dickies with a studded belt, Converse and a tight graphic shirt (my favourite in this film is baby blue with 'Daddy' emblazoned across the front in rainbow letters). But when he steps into the ring with a bull to once again be smashed into oblivion, Steve-O uses his own extremely public battle with addiction as a reference point, saying, "Even when life was at its most meaningless, you couldn't get me anywhere with a bull." Pontius continues to appear jovially either semi-nude or in drag, but when a newer cast member, Zach, prepares to launch himself off a ramp and into a waiting cactus, Pontius sings him a little theme tune: "Go, go Zach! The Jackass guys are getting old, we paid our dues, so we're handing the torch to you!"

With the expansion of the Jackass franchise and its box office success, there

was a pretty quick evolution of two types of Jackass stunt – the high-budget(ish) centrepiece ones, where something has been built, or animals have been brought in, or there needs to be some semblance of a plan; and the kind of stunts that a bunch of bored skate rats with a video camera and too much time on their hands might produce for a countercultural magazine. In Jackass Forever, quite noticeably – the higher budget stuff is done by the ageing members of the cast. That's not to say that there's any less risk, or grotesquery involved, but no one is riding a kid's BMX bike off a ramp and into a cactus. That low-budget punishment has been palmed off – not least because the film is chock full of gentle (and not-so-gentle reminders) of the ongoing physical and emotional cost of their very silly jobs. Teeth are missing or broken, arms bend in weird ways, joints hurt and when the lights go out and the rattlesnake hissing starts, there's an immediate exit strategy (even if it's a bad one).

I know that the declarations of Jackass Forever as a masterpiece are partially driven by a re-assessment of the franchise's value as a cultural product, but I do think at least some of it comes from its positioning as this lovingly cut together ode to ageing stupidly – to taking the same thing they've done for 20 years and approaching it with the same gusto they've always had. When I saw the film, one of my friends was trying to pin down their feelings and said "It's like art, a bit. Like if you keep doing it and you treat it like it's meaningful, then it has to become meaningful because it means something to you." (I'm probably mis-remembering that, but for the purposes of this episode... shh.) Johnny

Knoxville often talks about how, when Jackass was taking off, he was suddenly approached with other offers that would have let him become famous on his own. He talks about continuing with the Jackass crew as a no-brainer – “I liked what we were doing and I bet on my friends.” In making that decision, he ascribed meaning into their silliness, and their commitment over the next 20 years would slowly force everyone else to do the same thing.

The positive reviews in this allegedly final iteration of the franchise are a reflection of that commitment. The product itself has changed – the cuts between the strangely poignant and incredibly stupid have shifted away from being illustrative of youthful anxieties toward a sort of comfortable silliness in middle age. It’s unusual to see middle aged bodies willingly contorted into that sort of pain. I mean... it’s unusual to see anyone of any age launch themselves into a sea of mousetraps in the dark. But you know what I mean... 20-year-olds think they’re indestructible, 50-year-olds should know better. There’s something comforting in watching absolutely none of them know better. Or at least see them decide that knowing better is an illusion – a choice they can ignore with minimal consequence – and they’re ok with that. It feels correct in the canon of Jackass, somehow. That’s the literary canon not the physical canon, although there is one of those in Jackass Forever too, in case you were worried.

So, if one of the consequences of ageing disgracefully is being taken seriously, what else is there? Aside from the lush helpings of praise, I’ve noticed that there

has been a shift to actually talking about the role that homoerotic friendship plays in making Jackass not only palatable, but actually endearing and enduring. That’s a really fascinating shift. For those of you lucky enough to not remember the particular brand of early 2000s homophobia, if you were ever looking for a cheat code for to getting yourself beaten up, any proximity to or acknowledgement of queerness would get you there right quick. You could be shot on site for implying that someone was gay in the year 2000, so everyone just kind of danced around how gay Jackass was or didn’t acknowledge it at all. There was a not insignificant portion of conservative contemporary reviews of the TV series who didn’t take issue with the wanton violence, but rather saw the series as an example of the sissification of the red-blooded American man. Getting hit in the face, was fine. Get hitting in the dick was less fine. Saying you would rather get hit in the dick than the face because your face was just too pretty for a punch? That’s the gay agenda my friends, and they’re coming for your kids.

A lot of the queerness in the franchise stems from the Jackass crew’s willingness to offer their bodies as vulnerable to the world and specifically to each other. It’s not just vulnerability in the sense of impending pain – it’s also vulnerability in the sense that something that might be a point of pride, like your dick, or your stomach, or your face, might look silly. Take this quote from a BuzzFeed review of Jackass Forever by Shannon Keating: “The explicit homoeroticism, the abuse of one’s flesh vessel for others’ pleasure, the way the injured party is cared for and venerated afterward for daring to be

foolish as absolute hell — it's perversely sweet. Uplifting, even. You come to watch somebody get hurt in the most absurd possible way, but you stay because these guys love each other endlessly for it."

But there has been a shift, I think in a way that's really interesting. It's one thing to use your body to express vulnerability when you're young, dumb and full of cum. It's another to do it when you're an ageing man with a dicky knee and knuckles that hurt when the temperature changes. There's a certain bravado that it was satisfying to see punctured in the early series — seeing Bam Margera be great at skateboarding an incredible skateboarder and then get taken out at the knees by a swinging bag of sand is satisfying because it both skewers the bravado of a 20-something year old and then performs the loving celebration that Keating mentions. Age changes that slightly — by 50, most people's exuberance and pride in their body and its apparently limitless capabilities has dried up. Not least because you know that your body does actually have some limits. Yet it remains a key way of expressing interest or care in Jackass. Having Knoxville lovingly admire Steve-O's bee-coated dick and say, "It's making you look great though", or express cackling admiration when it turns out that Wee Man hasn't actually stuffed his speedo and that is quote "all Wee Man", feels more caring and studied at 50 than it would have at 20. They already know what the immediate consequences of their silliness are, so observing each other's uniquely crumbling bodies is simply a new way they can express love.

I think there's also significance in the

willingness to continue offering an ageing body up to pain because you know it's the thing that shows you care. It's clear everyone is feeling their age throughout the film. Yet at one point, in a signature move, Knoxville gets annihilated by a bull. He does a complete 360 in the air, and then slams into the ground. It turns out later that his rib and collarbone are shattered, and more concerningly, that he has a brain bleed. Previously, Steve-O had joked that the key to concussions was to have them before 50, and luckily "Knoxville is only 49". As everyone tries to jovially keep him conscious while medics load him up, Pontius quietly says "No one takes a hit like Knoxville. That's why he's the captain." Later, on Steve-O's podcast, Knoxville says that he knows he can't do bull stunts anymore, but that he misses it. He says it with the same quiet tone he uses to express fear in the earlier films. How do you express love to your merry band of misfits if you can't have your body obliterated by blunt force trauma anymore? Your body as an altar for both love and pain feels different when your body can't bounce back into the pain any more. It's another clever contrast between the poignant and in the phenomenally stupid. Jackass Oscar nomination when.

Well — those were some short but hopefully sweet thoughts on Jackass. When I started writing this, I didn't really have a complete outcome in mind, other than to acknowledge that I loved Jackass Forever and in spite of myself I found it strangely touching. It's not like anyone is on the brink of death, but the contrast between early films and this one is noticeable and perhaps more importantly, explicitly acknowledged



by everyone involved. Like I said in the opening, you can find whatever you want in it and this is what I wanted right now. If anyone else would like to talk about expressions of love through the medium of publicly using your dick as a ping pong paddle for the amusement of your friends, talk to me about it next time you see me at the pub! Peace!

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Episode written by Alex Johnson and produced by Wes Fahey.

Theme tune by Wes Fahey. ([Soundcloud: lee snipes](#))

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