

# My Favorite World #12



## There Is No Joy in Mudville

So by now, everybody has heard that Stewart is leaving the Daily Show. The Daily Show has been a huge factor in My Favorite World for years.

I am inconsolable.

But he was 'just' a comedian, a joker who made up stories to make people look foolish.

That this happens in the same week when an overpaid Wigstand was sacked from his Respectable Anchorman Desk for making up stories to make himself seem cool...well, the bullshit piles up so fast you need wings to stay above it all.

Even more better: I read the news of his departure as I watched him deliver a right rogering to the self aggrandizing Wigstand from last night's ep, a man who happens to have been his college roommate and one of his oldest friends – neither of which fact saved the Wigstand from a savage kick in the junk, satire-wise – all of which serves to unleash a cascade of multivalence that reminds me of my absolute favoriteness of this world of ours that is so bitterly saddening me right now.

And I really thought I would cry.<fn>Jury's out. It could still happen.</fn>

Stewart is one of the most effective critical operators facing the machine of our modern corporate media, perhaps the single most salient and effective critic we've seen of that frothy mix of ego and insiderism and fecal matter and rank commerce we've gorged upon as a staple of our diet of manufactured consent for the past 30, 50, 75, 150, however many years. Period. Say what you will about McLuhan and Chomsky (and others): no matter how sharp their insights, Stewart managed to tap the lode vein of bullshit running through our public discourse and present it in way that the powerful – and their media enablers – could not afford to ignore. For all the intellectual power of McLuhan or Chomsky, they were easy to ignore. Not Stewart. He pulled peoples' pants down and spanked them, in public, and dared them to ignore it.

They couldn't.

Even the Foxbots – who tried their damndest to ignore the power of The Daily Show<fn>And the parade of spinoffs and imitators who followed in its wake.</fn> could not escape the impact of Daily Show's critical stance. It's pretty simple...Jon Stewart and his writers fundamentally altered the way major media reports the news now. Even – especially – when they pretend it hasn't.

Time moves. Colbert is the new Letterman. Stewart has been at this gig for fifteen years. It's a long time for any gig, but you have to imagine that the pressure that the DS crew put on themselves – and the pressure of knowing that so many were waiting to pounce on any actionable misstep<fn>see, e.g., Dan Rather or Brian Wigstand</fn> – well that has got to wear a body down. Who can blame the guy for wanting something different?

I can't blame, but I can mourn. We need someone like this to keep the heat on those vapid performers with serious mein, the Wolf Beard of CNN, the shoutyfacers of MSNBC<fn>The Good Doc Maddow excepted, may she stay forever.</fn>, the horse's asses

of the Faux fools. John Oliver is doing good work. Colbert will be around, though I fear he will be more of an everyman host than has been his legacy. (You won't see him savaging the White House Correspondents from his new gig, I'll wager.)

And that leaves me bereft, thinking about a cable landscape that will be missing the sanest voice it has had for the past fifteen years. The ancient tradition of the jester, the fool, the one voice with the license to say what really needs to be said, to declare the Emperor naked, to afflict the pompous, &c. – there looms a gaping maw that Stewart filled for years. Shtfkgdmn.

It's still My Favorite World, and I'm raising a glass to the great fifteen years of work Stewart has delivered. We are a better society than we would have been without him. Salute, Stewart. Salute.

But joy? Not in Mudville. Not tonight.

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## My Favorite World #11



One of the most memorable movies of my lifetime is the 1990 version of *Cyrano de Bergerac*, starring Gerard Depardieu. It's a grand epic, lushly staged and photographed. And Depardieu was, at the time, at the absolute top of his game.<fn>He's become something of a joke in recent years, but in this period, he was *incroyable*. With *Cyrano*, he's one of a handful

to earn an Oscar nomination for a non-English speaking role.</fn>

Many buckles were swashed in the making of this film, feats of derring do beyond mortal imagination, swords flashing, death all around. And it is an unbelievably effective romance – in that sense of man-woman-crossed-stars-longing – that is not my usual cup of oolong, but when it works, one must submit or accept the ugly truth that one is made of stone.

The English subtitling was turned over to Anthony Burgess<fn>Author of *Clockwork Orange*, among many other great books.</fn>, who re-created a gorgeous rhyming couplet translation that was designed to mirror the language and rhythms of Edmond Rostand's original text. My French skills are too poor to pass any judgement on the fidelity, but the language itself is pure music.

Most people know the story...dazzling poet/war hero with a gargantuan schnozzola loves Roxanne, but feels himself too ugly to approach her as a suitor; they are, instead, great friends. Along comes the handsome, dullard Christian <fn>No really, that's his name; it's pretty clear throughout that Rostand is something of an anti-cleric</fn>; he loves Roxanne, but only insofar as an empty imbecile can. Cyrano – who knows her soul – provides the poetry that makes Roxanne 'love' Christian, but Christian dies in battle and she goes to live in a convent forevermore, clutching his blood-stained farewell letter to her snowy white and ample breast.<fn>You can look it up.</fn>

Cyrano is also something of a rabble-rouser, an anti-cleric and anti-royalist troublemaker – a champion of science over superstition – who makes enemies as easily as he makes water after a night of heavy drinking. In the end, his enemies toss a huge beam off a building onto his head, delivering a not-quite-immediate mortal wound. All the better to allow him the best dying words in the history of forever.

Here's the ending. He is visiting Roxanne at the convent, as he has done weekly since she went there to live fourteen years past. She does not know he is dying at first, and there is an amazing segment where she asks him to read Christian's blood-stained farewell letter for the first time, not realizing that Cyrano had written it himself those years ago. But he "reads" it, word for word, from memory, in a fading twilight that could not possibly illumine a written word. In a flash, she understands that it was in fact Cyrano who wrote the words that had captured her soul, that it was Cyrano who she loved. And at that moment, death rears its head:<fn>Keep reading, it's worth it, I promise.</fn>

CYRANO:

I believe he's staring...

that he dares to stare at my nose, that Ruffian!

*(He raises his sword.)*

What do you say? It's useless?...I know, ah yes!

But one cannot fight hoping only for success!

No! No: it's still more sweet if it's all in vain!

– Who are all you, there! – Thousands, you claim?

Ah, I know you all, you old enemies of mine!

Deceit!

*(He strikes in air with his sword.)*

There! There! Ha! And Compromise!

Prejudice, Cowardice! ...

*(He strikes.)*

That I make a treaty?

Never, never! – Ah! Are you there, Stupidity?

– I know that you'll lay me low in the end

No matter! I fight on! I fight! I fight again!

*(He makes passes in the air, and stops, breathless.)*

Yes you take all from me: the laurel and the rose!

Take them! Despite you there's something though

I keep, that tonight, as I go to meet my Deity,

there will I brush the blue threshold beneath my feet,

something I bear, in spite of you all, that's

free of hurt, or stain,

*(He springs forward, his sword raised;*

and that's...

*(The sword falls from his hand; he staggers, and falls back into the arms of Le Bret and Ragueneau.)*

ROXANE *(bending and kissing his forehead)*:

that's? ...

CYRANO *(opening his eyes, recognizing her, and smiling as he speaks)*:

***My panache.***

**Curtain.**

Well shit. That's a good way to die.

Note that *panache* translates several different ways – a feather, the plume in his hat, display, swagger, attack, or simply, spirit – that fit the scene perfectly. But the part of

this that stuck with me over the years – the reason this makes My Favorite World what it is – is this:

Motherfucker knows the most important thing is not what happens, not whether you win or lose – the most important thing is that you take it in stride and do it with style.

*What do you say? It's useless?...I know, ah yes!  
But one cannot fight hoping only for success!  
No! No: it's still more sweet if it's all in vain!*

Come on, now...is there any better description of what it means to be an engaged human in a random and cruel universe? Yes, we do it, if only because the doing it is in itself the point.

*Ah! Are you there, Stupidity?  
I know that you'll lay me low in the end  
No matter! I fight on! I fight! I fight again!*

Cyrano knows what the outcome will be. Yet he remains one of the great heroes in our mythic world. Not because of his exploits in battle or with a sword. That's commonplace shit. Cyrano is a hero because he refuses to relent when faced with a world of pimps and imbeciles and manipulators, even though he realizes that the resistance is likely futile. It's the willingness to stand against the madness that marks the hero.<fn>I mean for fuck sake and come on...we're arguing about vaccines again.</fn>

Keep coming at me, bitches.

*Yes you take all from me: the laurel and the rose!*

*Yet there is something still that will always be mine, and when I go to God's presence, there will I brush the blue threshold beneath my feet, something I bear, in spite of you all, that's free of hurt, or stain,*

*and that's*

*My Panache.*

Mark his words. Against all odds, you will not take my panache.

My. Favorite. World.

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## My Favorite World #10



The athletics-entertainment machine, especially at the professional level, never fails to bring us a parade of behaviors that, if it were our own children acting out so, would make us want to crawl behind the nearest rock in shame and disgrace. Every game from bouncing balls to twirling on the ice to driving around in circles real fast has its Hall of Shame inductees. Go back at least to Ty Cobb<fn>At least...we have no way of knowing, but I'm willing to bet that the guys who were winning marathons in ancient Greece were probably over-indulged boobs themselves.</fn> and bring it on up to today.

It makes sense. Elite athletes are among the most pampered and cosseted class of people around. They've spent most of their lives being told how special they are. When they find themselves in trouble, there are often legions of protectors

to make their troubles go away.<fn>As long as they continue to perform, naturally. Failure to excel means exile. It's a helluva motivator.</fn>

It's one part of why I really don't follow the sports world in any detail. I'll watch a game here and there (hockey is once again tickling my interest for an hour at a time), but I really don't care what happens.<fn>As long as the fucking Yankees take a kick to the junk on a regular basis. Fuck the fucking Yankees.</fn>

Except for tennis. I love tennis, and this week finds us midway through the Australian Open, the first major tournament of the year. The time difference makes watching it live a little hard, but I check the results every day, even after my second favorite player ever – and perhaps the best ever, period – Roger Federer was eliminated. Watching him play has been a big piece of My Favorite World for years.<fn>Also, too...David Foster Wallace wrote a profile of Federer for the NYTimes magazine years ago, and it's my favorite piece of writing on any sport, ever. Do yourself a favor...</fn> But even with Federer out of the tournament, there's still plenty to love.

What really makes tennis stand out right now is that most of the top players in the men's game consistently behave with remarkable style and grace. Don't misunderstand. Tennis is filled with entitled schmucks, just like any other sport.<fn>The elite women have more than a fair share of prima donnas, though there are a few coming along now who threaten to upend the game with style, wit, and grace. Eugenie Bouchard and Madison Keys...I'm looking at you, ladies. Brava!</fn> Of the top five men, four always show class and sportsmanship. Federer's speaking, like his game, is elegant and deceptively smooth. Rafael Nadal, who may be the second best player ever behind Federer, has had the good luck to have a rival in Federer who brings out his own generous and elegant nature. Novak Djokovich, who's making his own case for joining the

'best ever' bracket, settled in as third wheel in this rivalry with incredible humor and a style all his own. And now, Stan Warwinka is making a run at the top tier, and as a Davis Cup teammate and countryman of Federer, he's had a great role model for how to behave like a champion.<fn>Pro tip: it has nothing to do with stepping on an opponent lying on the ground, for example.</fn>

These guys, especially the top 3 of Federer, Nadal, and Djokovich, demonstrate great skill and ruthless intensity on the court, but it never devolves into trash talking or strutting. <fn>I deliberately do not include Andy Murray in this group. His playing is often superb. But geebus, what a whiny dick.</fn>

The piece of the Aussie Open that really hits My Favorite World this week came in an early round match between Nadal and Tim Smyczek, ranked 112th in the world, present in the Open through the grueling qualifier process, and given no realistic chance of beating the top-ranked Nadal. But he gave Rafa a hard match, and was within reach of a fifth set victory. And as Nadal was struggling to win the set up 6-5, someone in the crowd let out an intentionally distracting shriek as Nadal was in his serve motion. He shanked the serve. And Smyczek, who could have used the moment to regain the advantage, did what too many people call "unthinkable". As the crowd was booing the noisy jerk for his rudeness, Smyczek raised two fingers to indicate that Nadal should receive a do-over on the disrupted serve.

This is about the same as offering a batter a fourth strike, or letting an opposing team have another shot at first down because something was distracting. Try to imagine any other sport where someone within a whisker of pulling off the greatest victory of his career would do such a thing.

The chair umpire was amazed. The crowd was amazed. Nadal's team gave Smyczek a standing ovation. Even Nadal was amazed,

but given a reprieve he quickly served the game out for the match. Think of it...you're *that close* to beating one of the best in the history of the game, and you elect sportsmanship over cutthroat. Asked after the match why he did what he did, Smyczek replied:

*I know my parents would have killed me if I didn't. It was the right thing to do."*

We grow weary of watching people time and again twist conditions to gain advantage – because to let the opportunity to take advantage pass by has come to be adjudged 'loser' behavior. We are often certain that we are being lied to or manipulated by people who long ago ran out of shits to give about whether or not their parents would approve of their choices. But here, in this favorite game of mine, involving one of my favorite players, an unknown kid from the Midwest made himself one of my new favorites through a simple act of decency.

Courtesy. Decency. Style and grace. Tim Smyczek. My Favorite World.

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## My Favorite World #9



I've been listening to a bunch of Jim Hall recordings lately. This one, a duet with Ron Carter from 1972, exemplifies so

much of what I love about the music called jazz.

It's all there...the playfulness, the attentive listening. More than anything, the sense of two people having a real conversation while never saying a word.

Jim Hall died at the end of 2013 at the age of 83. Along the way, he wrote a few of the definitive chapters on what's possible with a guitar. He played smooth, he played cool, he played hot. He could play inside with great taste and economy, as in this Cole Porter classic with the Paul Desmond Quartet. (1959)

But Hall was also an adventurer, and he was one of few the cool guitar guys to embrace the heat and risk the expanded harmonic challenges necessary to keep up with someone like Sonny Rollins. Here's some terrific footage from that era (1962).

Jim Hall was widely praised as a generous teacher, as well, and spent time with Bill Frisell, Pat Metheny, and Julian Lage, helping these guys find their own voice and navigate the dark trench of the music industry. The following link is a full set of Hall's trio with Lage at Newport, recorded just a few months before Hall died in 2013. It might be the best hour you spend this week.

Jim Hall Trio w Julian Lage, Live at Newport Jazz (via NPR)

Nothing new in any of this...unless this is the first you've heard of Jim Hall. He kept playing well into his 83rd year, and every step of the way he was listening closely and responding with taste and honesty. His work, his legacy...a big part of My Favorite World.

