

BACK TO THE 'FUTURAMA'

Showrunner David X. Cohen
Explains How to Make
Sci-Fi Comedy with Heart

BY ERIN MAXWELL

LAWEEKLY

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MUSIC

CELL GETS SONIC

BY BRETT CALLWOOD



CELL

Keith Nealy: If not the best, one of the most memorable shows for me was when I worked as a crew member for Sonic Youth in 1990-91. After three months of shows with Neil Young and Crazy Horse, there were a handful of shows in Japan. One of the shows there was in a theatre and the vibe was very orderly with uniformed security guards/cops to make sure that it stayed that way — no standing, no freaky shows of emotion, etc., allowed. The band kept encouraging the kids to get out of their seats and a few did, beginning to shape the velvet rope that separated them from the band (I shit you not). Security is not digging this

at all — trying to make the kids sit down, shouting at them.

By the end of the show, the band was grabbing kids and bringing them onstage and the security was overwhelmed with an onslaught of kids running around in the feedback, cops chasing them across the stage during the set. Some of them started surfing on road cases across the stage, and I remember Lee grabbing one of the cops' hats off his head. Total, utter chaos, but no actual violence. Those kids were so happy, absolutely gleeful. We had to be snuck out of the building quickly and I think we went out for noodles after.

Cell's "Free People" single is out now. **LA**



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ON THE COVER:

Futurama collage, Laura White.

For photos see *ENTERTAINMENT*, pg. 4-6

LAWEEKLY

MUSIC..... 2

Taking a microscope to Cell.

BY BRETT CALLWOOD

MUSIC..... 3

Jay Rock gets the Rams pumped.

BY MARK STEFANOS

ENTERTAINMENT 4-6

Past, present, and *Futurama*.

BY ERIN MAXWELL

FOOD - WHAT'S POPPING UP 7

Let them eat sushi!

BY MICHELE STUEVEN

PRODUCTION AND DESIGN
LAURA E. WHITE FOR STREET MEDIA



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ALL PHOTOS COURTESY LOS ANGELES RAMS



MUSIC

JAY ROCK DEBUTS NEW RAMS TUNNEL ANTHEM ‘RAMS THAT WAY’

BY MARK STEFANOS

Jay Rock delivered a surprise performance at the Los Angeles Rams vs. San Francisco 49ers game last Sunday, Sept. 22, at SoFi Stadium, debuting the team’s new tunnel entrance anthem, “Rams That Way” — a reimaged version of his hit single “Still That Way.” The song will now play before every Rams home game throughout the season.

The Grammy-winning rapper from Watts previously collaborated with the Rams in 2020 and expressed pride

in representing his city once again. “When I get a call like this, it’s a privilege I won’t pass up. Proud to represent my city! Much love to my LA Rams family for having me!” Jay Rock said.

Legendary hip-hop group Naughty By Nature performed during halftime, delivering hits like “OPP.”

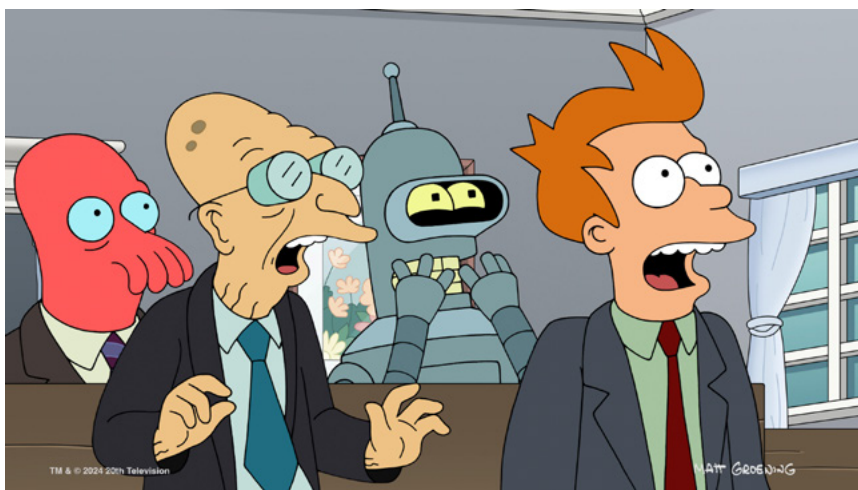
The Rams overcame a double-digit deficit to shock the 49ers with a 27-24 victory on a last-minute field goal, outscoring San Francisco by 17 points in the last 19 minutes. 



ENTERTAINMENT

BACK TO THE 'FUTURAMA' — SHOWRUNNER DAVID X. COHEN EXPLAINS HOW TO MAKE SCI-FI COMEDY WITH HEART

BY ERIN MAXWELL



For the last 25 years, television audiences have been given a vision of the future as it has been explored by a naive, somewhat obtuse pizza delivery boy and the motley crew of slackers that make up the Planet Express gang. Since its debut back in 1999 when Matt Groening and David X. Cohen first developed the series together, *Futurama* has been making sci-fi fanatics and toon enthusiasts guffaw with its astute satire of both pop culture and the sci-fi genre. Since then, *Futurama* has been able to make audiences laugh by poking fun at timeless '80s classics, offer ludicrous takes on perceived historical events, and make audiences buckle under the weight of an existential crisis thanks to poignant scripted moments that play heartstrings

like a fiddle.

Much of this storytelling genius goes to the writing staff and their fearless leader Cohen, who spared a few moments to talk about his history with the long-running show, the artists and talent behind its creation, the insane level of genius behind certain episodes, and the joy he derives from emotionally destroying the show's fanbase. Here are just a few reasons why *Futurama* is one of the smartest shows on television. Ever.

Congrats on delivering 25 years of *Futurama*.

You're killing me. Twenty-five years. It feels like we just started.

I go to Comic-Con and stuff, and I constantly run into people who say, "I



David X. Cohen

AMY SUSSMAN / GETTY IMAGES

grew up watching your show," and I'm like, "You grew up watching our show? But didn't we just start it?" But I guess it was long enough for that.

After a bit of a hiatus, you've returned to Hulu. Last season, you tackled COVID, cancel culture and anti-vaxxers. This season, it was fast fashion, Squid Games, Danny Trejo, evil temp workers, and the Fyre Festival. Other than staying topical, why do you think *Futurama* resonates with people?

Let me just say that one of our secret weapons is just being a science fiction show, we can be topical in a way that's not quite on the mark intentionally. So if we want to [focus on] cancel culture, it doesn't have to be a cancel culture story that literally happened today, but our

version of it happening in 1,000 years. So instead of COVID-19, it's EXPLOVID-23. We're always doing it by analogy; a commentary on what's happening today, but without actually citing actual events or places and times of things that are happening right now.

Do you think setting it into the future protects you?

Yes, it does. It's armor. Time armor.

Where do you think *Futurama* kind of fits into the current animation landscape? Because animation has changed a great deal.

It is kind of funny. Originally, there were very few points of comparison when it first came out. *The Simpsons* be-



ing such a huge point of comparison for us, since we have Matt Groening as the king of both shows.

Originally it felt like this show was trying to rip off *The Simpsons*, and now I feel like we're kind of the reference point for many newer sci-fi themed shows.

And I will also say there was very little to reference at the time when we began in 1999, in terms of sci-fi comedy in general. And I'll say not even just animated sci-fi comedy, but just sci-fi comedy. You could point to a couple things, like the movie *Spaceballs* and some very specific stuff, but there wasn't that much of a genre. I feel like we have helped open that up.

It seems as though episodes such as "Luck of the Fry-ish" and "Jurassic Bark" are less about enjoyment and more about incapacitating society through the most emotionally devastating moments of television ever broadcast. When you're creating those episodes, is that your intent — to destroy society one heartbreaking, animated moment at a time?

It kind of is. I will admit that I do kind of laugh gleefully sometimes, if we're

working on our approximately once-a-year attempt to break people's hearts.

If I think we're going to get a real tear in people's eye at this point then I kind of go, "HA HA HA!" It's a strange sensation because I do feel when we write those emotional episodes, it is entirely from the heart and usually things people have experienced or can sympathize with, at least. There's real emotion in there.

But I will confess: I do feel a lot of pride in those episodes when they work. They're hard to pull off because I feel like it's such a high degree of difficulty to get viewers of a crazy cartoon to be invested in the reality of it to the level that they're feeling those emotions of the character.

So if a show is going to other planets and there's lobsters and robots running around and stuff, and people still are feeling the emotions of the characters to the point that they cry, I do feel a lot of pride — an evil laugh and full of pride — in that.

It's not that it's insincere in any way or anything. That's my victory lap. To laugh at all the people crying.

But that was another sort of a deviation from many other elements that we decided to go out on a limb and try in

some of the earlier seasons, starting with "Luck of the Fry-ish" which I often cite as my favorite episode — in fact, for this exact reason, which is that it's going to be a story with this heartbreaking, touching ending. We did not know at the time if our viewers would go for that or if they would be like, "Oh, what a cheat." But it was a good lesson. It was very well received, and it gave us the confidence to periodically try these intentionally emotional episodes.

So, I am proud, genuinely. That's one of the claims to the show that we are known for, those touching episodes.

The dog one ... I do apologize for. That was too cruel. But we have a few other ones where I think we earned the tear.

Walking back just a smidge to talk about your history and your industry cred as a science nerd: you have degrees in physics and computer science, and you were going towards a PhD when you shifted into comedy. So which is harder: getting a PhD or comedy writing?

I guess it's easier to get your PhD, statistically.

I don't mean it's easier, workload-wise,

but you know, there's probably more PhDs. In computer science, particularly, it might be a toss-up. They're both pretty hard roads to go down. I still feel regret sometimes — and I know we have a few other writers who were former science people who feel similarly — where I do wish sometimes I could have lived two lives, because I still feel like science is sort of the most important thing you can do with your life. To increase humankind's understanding of the world and the universe, I feel is the most noble thing you can do.

When was that flip to become a comedy writer?

That was a very gradual process. In some ways, I would say I was already a comedy writer, but I just didn't realize it was a professional option. I thought it was a hobby. So my life is a case of my hobby becoming my career, and my career becoming my hobby, possibly even going back to the earliest days of my life.

I was a big fan of *Mad Magazine* and just that kind of stuff, and I would draw cartoons and force my sister to buy them for a penny when we were little kids. That was my professional comedy

writing debut, by the way, because I did make that one penny sale to my sister, although I did threaten to beat her up, probably, if she didn't pay the penny.

I would write humor columns for my high school newspaper, and I wrote for the *Harvard Lampoon* humor magazine when I was in college, but at all times thinking this is just a hobby. This is something I like to do, but I didn't realize really that it was a career option.

Is there anything in recent sci-fi that you haven't yet parodied that you would like to get your mitts on?

We do have some Alien stuff coming up. We've certainly done a lot of *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*. One which we're actually discussing right now if you have your hardcore sci-fi fans — if you want to go back in time — but we're talking about a Ringworld related episode right now, which is, again, not in any way based on the book, other than the general idea that there is a ring-shaped world, but, you know, I know it's been in Halo and various things too.

We're always scrounging for ideas. That's another one of those questions I find really hard to answer.

In the episode "Quid Games," complex math is once again a plot point.

Yeah, it's called a catenary. It was accurate! A catenary is if you hang a cable, like a telephone cable, between two poles, so it's connected at two points — the catenary is where the cable will form. So in that episode, it was chains of humans who were hanging and trying not to fall to their death. So we can hook our arms together, we can form this structure called a catenary. And then that was our physics basketball player, Bubblegum Tate, scrawling the correct equation.

Our equations are always double-checked! That was the correct equation for a catenary.

When you have these types of math-heavy episodes that feature equations, theorems and differentials, do you know how you're going to work them into the story prior to the episode?

I would say it usually it comes in afterwards, but I'm going to give you a couple of exceptions:

So I would say the more common way that we work in those jokes is [when] the professor's talking, if there's a chalkboard behind him that you're going to notice. When we're working on a rough version of the episode, we're like, "Oh, you're looking at that chalkboard

for a long time. We better put a funny equation up there. Who's got a funny equation?" Sometimes it's just because they're in a science-y place and there's a background we have to fill in now.

And there's times like the one we just talked about, the catenary, where we're like, okay, they're trying to do this thing, so somebody just pitches a math joke, because we do have some math people on staff — that might have been me, honestly — and it happens to fit the story, but the math is not really that critical. But we're like, might as well do it right if we're going to do it!

And then there's a couple of occasions I can point to, one which has aired and one which has not aired yet, where the equations were front and center. And this is bordering on an "evil laugh" level of pride from me because I feel like you would not see this on another show.

We did an episode ["The Prisoner of Benda" from season 6] which starts from the basic cartoon theme of all the characters have their brains switched into each other's bodies, so all the characters are in the wrong body, and they have their voice and their personality in someone else's body and they have to switch back. And we were talking about doing that. We're like, "Well, you know, we've seen that on *Scooby-Doo* or various other cartoons." And then we were like, "Can we sci-fi that premise up a little bit?"

What if the machine that switches your brain can't switch you back? So if your brain is going to get back to where it started, it has to go through a chain of other people. That's kind of an interesting twist. And then we started thinking like, "Well, could everybody get back to their original body if the machine can't just make the direct switch back? Is it possible to scramble people? Will you always be able to get them back?"

So our writer, Ken Keeler, has a PhD in applied math. We had been discussing the story and we broke for the day. We came back the next morning and Ken stood up and said, "I proved the theorem."

He proceeded to show us his theorem, which said that as long as you introduce two people into the mix who haven't had their brains switched yet, you can always get every single person, no matter how many there are, back to their original body. And so we're like, this is too good. We have to use this.

You will never receive that on any other comedy on TV! With the dramatic music builds ... a cut to a mathematical proof. Even if it is for only half a second.

And while on the subject of giving thanks to the geniuses behind the curtain.

Let's give credit to our animators at Rough Draft Studios. We've had many just incredible directors over there, in-



cluding Rich Moore from the early days, and Peter Avanzino, who's our supervising director now. We often write stuff which is very hard to visualize, even stuff that's literally invisible. And I have these meetings with the animators, currently, Avanzino, and he's like, "How are we supposed to show this?" And I have a standard fall-back line now, which is, "That's your problem." Mwa-ha-ha!

So it's like, to create an animated show, there are a lot of specialized jobs, which writing is one of, but animation is an equally important part, and acting is an equally important part. And no one can really do the other people's jobs. And so people are really working hard in these very different areas to do these things.

What do you see as the legacy of Futurama?

I think we broke some ground in terms of making science fiction that is funny but it's also good science fiction. So I think I wouldn't mind if that was the legacy of the show to say you can make

good science fiction that is fun and it does not skimp on the science angle.

When you're talking about science fiction, you're frequently talking about these themes that are very overwhelming. It's about planets that are going to blow up, or stars are forming, or the universe is collapsing, or stuff that is many steps beyond the control of human beings, and yet, to make it funny or to make people care, we're always trying to think about what is the personal what is our character's personal story as it relates to these things ...

And so that's sort of how I feel we can address these giant sci-fi stories in a way that affects people, hopefully. It's always really about what makes our characters happy and sad. What do they love? What are they concerned about? And that's always what matters, no matter what these giant settings are. And the giant settings are really cool, but the meaning is in what the characters' feelings are about them.

I guess that's my summary of this show. *The Futurama season 12 finale airs Sept. 30 on Hulu.* [E]

WHAT'S POPPING UP

Sushi And Tea In Pasadena And L.A. Loves Alex's Lemonade

BY MICHELE STUEVEN



SUSHI ROKU

[Sushi Roku Pasadena](#) is celebrating its 20th Anniversary and newly remodeled space with 50% off the entire menu from this week through Sunday, Oct. 29.

Menu highlights include tuna crudo with avocado, microgreens, garlic chips, sesame soy, aji amarillo, American Wagyu beef skewers with black pepper sauce, Chilean sea bass with truffle miso, signature rolls like the Gensai with cucumber, jalapeño, avocado, topped with salmon and kizami wasabi, rice cracker, yuzu olive oil, and a tropical hibiscus cocktail made with hibiscus-infused Cazadores cristalino tequila, passion-fruit, coconut, pomegranate. Reservations can be made at sevenrooms.com/explore/Rokupasadena/reservations.

On Sunday, Sept. 29 the [Atwater Village Farmers' Market](#) will host its first Passport to Fall Benefit Event, a one-day

celebration of the fall harvest and community in support of Food Access LA. It's a passport-style tasting experience featuring seasonal bites from eight local vendors, along with the opportunity to win prizes in a special raffle. Proceeds from the family-friendly event will support Food Access LA's critical programs, which provide fresh, healthy food and nutrition education to underserved communities across Los Angeles.

Fan of the Market at \$40 includes a passport for fall-themed bites and one raffle ticket, Friend of the Market at \$60 includes a passport for fall-themed bites, two raffle tickets, and a tote bag, Partner of the Market at \$80 includes a passport for fall-themed bites, three raffle tickets, a tote bag, and mug. Participating vendors include Jiminez/Marcie's, Huarache, Cuyama Orchards,

McFarlin farmers and Masa Catalina, Post Era Coffee, Mort and Betty's and SB Coastal Candles. Tickets can be purchased online at givebutter.com/bj4wt and on-site.

Join Marie-Antoinette and the Court of Versailles for Afternoon Tea in your fashionable French-core best and enjoy an immersive dance performance by the Pasadena Civic Ballet at the historic [Langham Huntington, Pasadena](#). The highly stylized event is appropriate for all ages and includes photo ops with Marie-Antoinette and her Royal Court strolling table-to-table, a menu of French-inspired savories, petits fours, and other delicacies to accompany fine teas. Learn a classic Versailles waltz and participate in the grand costume parade

Seating times are 10 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. on Saturday, Oct. 5, and Sunday, Oct. 6, 2024. "Let Them Eat Cake" is being held in the Lobby Lounge at The Langham Huntington, Pasadena. A por-

tion of the proceeds from the event will be donated to the Pasadena Civic Ballet Foundation, helping aspiring dancers to be able to afford lessons. For tickets, please visit [OpenTable](#). Seating is limited, price excludes tax. A 20% gratuity will be added to all checks.

[L.A. Loves Alex's Lemonade Stand](#) is back in the UCLA Royce Quad for the 12th annual cookout in Los Angeles on Saturday, Oct. 5, 2024. The 2023 event raised more than \$1.3 million for Alex's Lemonade Stand Foundation which raises funds to help battle childhood cancer. A long list of best chefs in the country includes Chris Bianco of Pizzeria Bianco, Clark Staub and Jill Davie of Full of Life Flatbread in Los Alamos, David Lentz, Stephanie Mutz from Sea Stephanie Fish, Michael Cimarusti of Connie and Ted's and Providence as well as Adam Perry Lang and Neal Fraser. Get tickets at alexlemonade.org/event/406/register. 



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