

On the The Grand Tour and The Stig with the Fake Mustache

Written by Vincent J. Shuta Jr.
Saturday, 06 May 2017 13:49 -

Enough time has passed now that I've been able to watch The Grand Tour as a show, not as an emotionally charged event of epic proportions. It's not longer has to carry whatever expectations I was laying on it's back, and can take an honest look at it.

What I've discovered, is that Jeremy Clarkson was right when he said it's "Top Gear in Witness Protection." The three blokes from England are really doing the same shtick wearing a fake mustache so that the BBC won't sue them.

And it's this mustache—and other bits of disguise—that have garnered most of the criticism of the first series.

For instance, Celebrity Brain Crash is a poke at the fact that the BBC won't let them do the celebrity interview segment. Or more likely, they realized that segment killed the momentum of the show in the old Top Gear and said "how can we memorialize the segment." It's taken a lot of heat in reviews, but I think it's because it's such a tone shift from the rest of the show.

No, James May is not stupid enough to have to ask "Does that mean he's not coming on?" every time the guest meets an obviously fake and horrible end. And of course the stars obviously aren't really killed off. So the segment pulls you out of the normal mode of the show. It's no longer some guys throwing the bull, and you're hanging out with them. It's as if you're in your garage with your friends, drinking some beer, leaning on the Plymouth Fury you're restoring, and three of your buddies spontaneously started doing pantomime. No matter how good it is, the question that comes to mind is "Why?"

I'm not saying they should lose the skit, because honestly watching James May calmly cleaning Daniel Ricciardo off the tent window just doesn't get old. But I think it's this Top Gear yet not Top Gear flavor that's making people not like it. It's familiar, yet totally not. Once people get used to it, it might take less criticism.

But one segment that definitely is suffering from a chaffing mustache is the segment with "The American." When I first watch the series, I knew this wasn't working but I hadn't nailed down exactly why.

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If you go back and watch Top Gear, they so much herald the stick as an inhumanly perfect driver, that you might not notice they treat him as a tool instead of a person. He's something weird that you just happen to be able to stick in a car and get good lap times. If you want to say he has webbed buttocks, his legs are hydraulic and he sleeps upside down like a bat, no problem. He doesn't care. He doesn't hear it. Richard Hammond once said that speech to the Stig sounds like “ [a quacking noise.](#) ”

According to [Wikipedia](#) —which is on the internet so it must be true—the character was forged from an inability of finding a driver that could speak well on camera. They created the Stig so that the driver wouldn't have to speak.

So now fast forward to the Grand Tour. “The American” is none other than Mike Skinner, a successful race car driver with [his own radio show on SiriusXM](#) . He can speak perfectly well on camera. You might not believe that watching the Grand Tour, but it's true.

You would think the Grand Tour would be pleased with having a driver who really could be a fourth commentator, but they've the track tests amazingly the same as before. Clarkson does the commentary, while Skinner quips off redneck jokes to fill in for whatever the Stig had on the radio. The pacing is exactly the same.

For as close as it is to the original, it's the most broken part of the show. And here's why:

“The American” is not an anonymous, imaginary, inhuman character. It's a real person the audience expects to have depth. So the segments feel like they've stolen that depth from him, primarily as a shot at America. And the fact that Mike is somehow complicit in this is even more depressing.

Now I can hear Clarkson answering, “No, no! That's really all he's got. You're expecting an American to have deep, majestic thoughts like he's from Britain and they just don't have it in them.”

Even if that were true—which it isn't—Clarkson and May have said that [they agonize over](#)

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[every word in the show. "TV is writing' they say](#)

. So one way or another this mess with “the American” is intentional.

And it's got to stop.

What I'd like to see is a take on the American that's less jingoistic, less “A Stig That Talks,” and very much less “Top Gear.”

Have Jeremy be quiet for a change and let Mike do the talking on the lap. Let him give real opinions of the car instead of being forced to call everything communist.

Present him as a real person who has a chance to be a part of the friendship of the original three.

You know what, this is just hitting me now like a slap to the face. This is why “The American” doesn't work—at least for Americans.

The fantasy of watch Top Gear or the Grand Tour, is that we're hanging out with the presenters. We're leaning the hood of that Ferrari while they talk about it. Any they're happy that we're with them. The fantasy is we're buddies.

Now we see how an American would be treated. Not as a buddy, but as comic relief.

I get the distinct impression that I, the viewer, would be as quickly dismissed as a no-nothing redneck as Mike Skinner. And knowing that I know a lot less about cars and driving than Mike reinforces that point.

It takes me out of that fantasy, and sends me back to my easy chair, just watching a show

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that's sometimes about cars. And it makes me think, "I'll bet [those other guys](#) wouldn't treat me like this."