

I've come to recognise that the majority of media that I enjoy is widely considered 'bad' by most, or perhaps that's exactly the reason why I check out the things I do in the first place. I don't think it's an act of contrarianism as much as it is my ability to just give things a go when others normally wouldn't.

I also have a peculiar fondness for media that spends too much of its time trying to seem 'cool' than it does anything else. That's usually to their detriment, but they can also turn out *hilarious*, and, in *Sonic Underground's* case, serve as a somewhat invaluable time capsule into what people just a few decades ago thought 'cool' really meant.

1999's *Sonic Underground* was an *incredibly* loose adaptation of the widely popular *Sonic The Hedgehog* video game series, and was the third North American Sonic cartoon, following *The Adventures Of Sonic The Hedgehog* and *Sonic The Hedgehog (SatAM)*, which both debuted in 1993.

The show saw Sonic The Hedgehog reuniting with his long-lost siblings, Sonia and Manic, and embarking on a quest to take down the evil supervillain Dr Robotnik, and to find their missing mother. The three hedgehogs are equipped with magical medallions, (a present from their mother) with the power to turn into a musical instrument. These instruments, while still letting them play music, also have built-in defensive powers, so they double as weapons. The trio form a rock band known as the 'Sonic Underground', with their own branded touring van that they use to get around the dangerous streets of 'Robotropolis'. Plus, they play an original song together each episode.

This show is a *lot* to unpack, (I even left some things out of that summary for the sake of simplicity) and that's the leading reason I wanted to watch *Sonic Underground* in the first place. I *love* things that can be overly complicated, messy, rich with their own internal logic and difficult to explain to someone just how insane they are without just making them view it with their own eyes.

It either shows that this thing was loved *so much* by its creators that they just kept adding to it over time, or that this thing was *not* loved by its creators at all, and they just threw together whatever they thought seemed cool, making it a fun thing to champion because *nobody else is*.

In the eyes of the general public, *Sonic Underground* is the least-beloved Sonic cartoon, from a time when Sega (The video game company that created Sonic) was moving on from the games where these cartoons originated from, and into a new era, at least for them, so *Sonic Underground* feels as though it wasn't considered a very high priority to Sega. Why else would they allow something this ridiculous to air on television?

*Sonic Underground* was, I would assume, the first Sonic cartoon animated using digipaint. (The reason I say this is because there really isn't much information online about how this show was made) Digipaint, for those unaware, is the process of scanning physical drawings and filling in the colours on a computer, or just animating on a computer to begin with, as opposed to using animation cells. Most animation companies made the switch from using cells to using digipaint in the late 90's and early 00's, but this transition was infamous for being rather rough. This also goes for *Sonic Underground*, whose bright and garish colours and dated visual effects actually gave me a headache after a while.

I think that the appeal of *Sonic Underground* shows through when, even if the artwork is ugly and the atmosphere is *absolutely rancid*, seeing a familiar face within a sea of characters that, admittedly, don't feel *at all* like they would fit in with the *Sonic The Hedgehog* video game series, can feel like a well-needed breath of fresh air.

I finally get to talk about the characters in this show! *Sonic Underground* is very different from the other two 90's Sonic cartoons, as, while it was all animated by the same people, I get the feeling that the decisions made about the characters and story were made by some very different blokes.

While Sonic is just as jovial and, of course, fast as he is in other cartoon outings, (Which was a relief) no longer are his friends milling about the hidden kingdom of Knothole, nor are they stopping to beat up some robots and eat a chilli dog in the middle of nowhere. Yes, even if the incredibly cheesy opening song calls Sonic and his siblings "leaders of the freedom fight", beloved freedom fighters from *Sonic SatAM*, such as Sally Acorn or Bunnie Rabbot, are never present.

In their place stand Sonic's long-lost siblings, Sonia and Manic, who are both voiced by the same person as Sonic is: Jaleel White. These two are a strange addition, and I'm glad that this show exists in its own canon because their existence would raise a lot of questions otherwise.

Sonia is your basic "girly girl" 90's cartoon character; whenever she gets her hair or clothes dirty, she complains about having just gotten them washed, she knows a lot about beauty care despite being a literal criminal on the run, and because of these things she is always mocked by her brothers. If it weren't really obvious that Sonia is voiced by a man, though, I would like her a lot more, because I think she looks really cool. For one, she plays the keytar in the band (Also known as one of the best, but also one of the most impractical, instruments) but, for two, they incorporated "punk-rock" elements into her design in a better way than they did with Manic; I think her bright pink, fluffy hairdo is very cute, and her main outfit is basic but nice, fitting in with her brothers, whose outfits are also not very complicated.

Manic, on the other hand, is a bit different. I think he's interesting; he plays the drums in the band, he has a history of shoplifting and pickpocketing, and he uses a lot of now-dated slang, which is always equal parts funny and interesting to me. His design, on the other hand, is 90's, but not in a cute way. Manic has two piercings in one of his ears, a plain orange vest and a pair of stripy sneakers. He also has the most insane hairstyle I have ever seen on a Sonic character: Long and very messy, bright-green spikes.

I'm unsure whether this *interesting* design choice was inspired by fashion and music trends of the 90's, or popular anime characters with similarly complicated hairstyles. Either way, I've compared it to a pineapple more than once.

But the obvious elephant in the room is the name "Manic"... Or is it? Sonia and Manic's names were very clearly chosen with the idea that they sound similar to "Sonic", and while Sonia's name is perfectly acceptable, when I first began watching *Sonic Underground*, I thought that the name "Manic" seemed a little inappropriate for a character in a children's cartoon. After all, somebody who is "manic" experiences "mania", defined as "*mental illness marked by periods of great excitement or euphoria, delusions, and overactivity*" and it's prevalent in people with bipolar disorder.

All I can say regarding the name “Manic” is that this *was* the 90’s, and censorship rules were very different back then than they are nowadays. While it’s not a *particularly* bad name for a character, (I’ve probably heard of worse) and anyone I’ve talked to about his name has never really reacted negatively to it, you certainly wouldn’t hear about a character being called something similar in a more recent cartoon.

I think that *Sonic Underground* is a really bizarre show, but the element that resonated with me the most was, by far, the memories I was uncovering in *real time* while watching it. This show feels *so* much like the stories I used to write alongside friends just a few years ago, ones we would just keep adding to whenever we had the time, and developing a living, breathing world with its own rules and characters. We’d fill books with intricate illustrations and write songs about the journeys these little made-up people had gone on, and we loved every minute of it, even if it resulted in stories with clearly very little oversight. And while I’ve never read *or* written fanfiction before, I can only imagine how much more this ridiculous cartoon would resonate with those who *had*, especially as children with wild imaginations, and a pure-hearted adoration of the strange creatures going on epic quests inside their televisions.

In that way, the questionable decisions made with the plot and designs of *Sonic Underground* are not quite justified, but they *are* given another angle for viewers to appreciate them from. As I’ve mentioned before, *Sonic Underground* cares, above all else, about being cool, and when that is your primary goal, *of course* you would throw whatever you could at the wall and hope that it all sticks, and that’s also the approach many children, like myself, took with crafting our own fictional universes.

While *Sonic Underground* is a very strange permutation of what people believed was ‘cool’ over 20 years ago, now seeming to only be a bizarre relic of the past whose only value is confusing people whenever it is brought up off-handedly in conversation, I think that it’s funny and sweet, and might carry more weight for people willing to think more about what’s really in front of them.