

10 Real Good Streaming Shows You May Have Missed

By Steve Sternberg

The first major original scripted streaming hit series, *House of Cards*, debuted on Netflix in 2013. In 2015, less than half of U.S. homes (47%) subscribed to any streaming service, and just 16% subscribed to two or more. By 2017, 64% subscribed to at least one, with 33% subscribing to at least two. In 2020, SVOD subscriptions had risen to the point where 78% of U.S. homes got at least one streaming service, 55% received two or more, and the average household subscribed to three.

I bring up these subscriber trends to point out that a lot of people started getting streaming services during the past three or four years. So there are a lot of excellent streaming series that ended their original runs before many people had a chance to see them.

Here are several original streaming series that ended before 2019, which you may have missed. I recommend them all, and all are still available for your bingeing pleasure.

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Lilyhammer (Netflix 2012-2014): Steven Van Zandt (*The Sopranos*) stars in Netflix's first scripted series as a New York mob underboss, Frank "The Fixer" Tagliano. After testifying against the Mafia boss who ordered a hit on him, he is given a new identity. He asks to be relocated to Lillehammer,

Norway (a place he fell in love with while watching the 1994 Winter Olympics), where he believes no one will look for him. In his new life, he is known as Norwegian-American immigrant, Giovanni "Johnny" Henriksen.

As he tries to settle in to this peaceful, rules-conscious town, Johnny uses his mob talents to deal with bullies, bad guys, and bureaucrats alike. He purchases a bar and simultaneously befriends and corrupts several of the town's locals, a colorful and quirky cast of characters who come to his aid when the mob eventually tracks him down.

It's not easy to successfully combine comedy and violence, but it is expertly handled here. The show is also notable for the way it deals with immigration and racism. The dialogue switches back and forth between subtitled Norwegian and English (which Johnny apparently understands, but can't speak).

When *Lilyhammer* debuted in Norway, it was watched by one-fifth of the country's population. Since the series premiered well before Netflix was a major streaming force, it never received the accolades it deserves in this country. But you can enjoy bingeing all three eight-episode seasons. The large cast includes, Trond Fausa Aurvag, Marian Saastad, Steinar Sagen, and Fridtjov Saheim.



House of Cards (Netflix 2013-2018): This was Netflix's first original scripted series, the one that started it all – and largely contributed to the streamer's initial subscriber growth. Kevin Spacey is ruthless congressman, Francis Underwood, who, after being promised the post of Secretary

of State in exchange for his support to help elect the President, is betrayed and not offered the position. He, along with his equally ruthless and ambitious wife Claire (Robin Wright), seeks revenge on everyone involved in denying his promotion. The series follows the couple's elaborate plans to gain power and ascend to the presidency.

Five brilliant seasons were followed by an ill-advised sixth and final season (after Kevin Spacey was fired over sexual harassment allegations). The excellent cast includes, Michael Kelly, Kate Mara, Corey Stoll, Constance Zimmer, Michel Gill, Mahershala Ali, and Nathan Darrow. *House of Cards* was the first original online-only streaming television series to receive major Emmy nominations.



Narcos (Netflix 2015-2017): The rise of Columbian drug cartels during the Reagan/Bush “war on drugs” 1980s, led by cocaine kingpin Pablo Escobar (Wagner Maura), is chronicled in this riveting drama. The story is narrated by DEA agent Steve Murphy (Boyd Holbrook), who, along with

his partner Javier Pena (Pedro Pascal) try to capture (or kill) the drug lord. The legal system, honest and corrupt politicians, as well as the Columbian police and military are all involved in either helping or hindering their efforts. Conflicts between the infamous Medellin and Cali cartels, and the DEA/CIA war on drugs lead to massive battles in the streets of Columbia and many ruthless murders of cartel members, police, and innocent civilians alike.

The rise and fall of Pablo Escobar, the real-life gangster that put most fictional ones to shame, covers the first two thrilling seasons. The equally ruthless Cali cartel, one of Escobar's main rivals, is the subject of the equally good third season. It should be noted that while based on real life, many of the events and characters in the series are fictionalized. The excellent cast also includes, Alberto Ammann, Maurice Compte, Pailina Gaitan, Joanna Christi, Matias Varela, Damian Alcazar, Francisco Denis, Arturo Castro, Pepe Rapazote, and Luis Guzman. The planned fourth season became a companion series, *Narcos: Mexico* (also worth checking out).



Sense8 (Netflix 2015-2018): Many of the best sci-fi series are canceled too soon – sometimes because they are too niche to find a broad enough audience to justify high production costs, sometimes because they do not fit into the easily promotable “western in space” or “post apocalypse” genres. Unfortunately, the innovative and thought-provoking

Sense8 fits both categories. It has a diverse cast, including a trans character, and explores issues related to sexual identity, politics, and empathy. It was canceled after two seasons, which caused such an uproar among its fans that Netflix took the unusual step of returning the show two years later with a two-hour finale to finish the story (the second season ended with a cliffhanger).

Created by Lana and Lilly Wachowski, *Sense8* follows eight strangers from different parts of the world, who discover they are mentally and emotionally linked. They can sense and communicate with one another, and when needed can “occupy” one another’s bodies to use their own knowledge and skills to help escape danger. The danger comes from a secret organization that is trying to hunt them down as they try to live their everyday lives and figure out how and why they are all connected. These eight

were all born on the same day, so are considered part of the same “cluster.” There are other clusters out there as well. Some become allies, some adversaries.

The series grabs you from the get-go and never lets up. The strong international cast includes, Jamie Clayton, Max Riemelt, Miguel Angel Silvestrie, Brian J. Smith, Tina Desai, Bae Doona, Naveen Andrews, Tuppence Middleton, Freema Agyeman, Ami Ameen, Toby Onwumere, and Daryl Hannah.



Casual (Hulu 2015-2018): An independent, wealthy, and emotionally immature bachelor (Tommy Dewey) has developed a popular dating website, which he uses to find casual dates/sex partners for himself. He lives with his newly divorced psychiatrist sister (the wonderful Michaela Watkins), who has her own emotional baggage, and her fiercely independent and sexually-active teenage daughter (Tara Lynne Barr). All three are navigating the dating pool, and all their relationships are of the casual variety (blind dates and one-night stands).

To be honest, I can't really explain why I like this show so much. Ordinarily a comedy about rich, lonely, and sad people looking for intimacy and happiness, wouldn't interest me at all. But I stumbled onto the series while searching for something new to watch, and I wound up bingeing the entire first season in one sitting. It's an inexplicably entertaining show and the acting by all three leads is superb. The series gets better in each of its four seasons.



Daredevil (Netflix 2015-2018): While the recent Marvel superhero series on Disney+ have deservedly received both viewer and critical praise, most of the Marvel series that previously aired on Netflix were actually better. Since Disney

was developing a new streaming service to house original Marvel series, its deal with Netflix was not renewed and all the Netflix Marvel series were canceled. This included *Daredevil*, *Jessica Jones*, *Luke Cage*, *Iron Fist*, and *The Punisher*.

One of Marvel's "street-level" heroes, *Daredevil* raised the bar for superhero storytelling on television. Charlie Cox gives a strong, nuanced performance as Matt Murdoch/Daredevil – blind lawyer by day, vigilante crimefighter by night. Street-level heroes are those who protect their own cities or neighborhoods, rather than getting involved in the planet-saving exploits of groups like The Avengers, X-Men, or Fantastic Four.

While he has no actual superpowers, Daredevil he has ninja-like fighting skills, and heightened senses to make up for his lack of sight. The fight scenes are among the best I've seen on television. As with all Marvel vigilantes, he is conflicted and haunted by events in his past, and struggles with the violence he is forced to inflict on the bad guys – at what point do you become what you are fighting?

Deborah Ann Woll is excellent as Karen Page, Murdoch's former legal assistant, now a crusading reporter (she also has a key role in *The Punisher*). Great heroes are often defined and elevated by great villains, and Vincent D'Onofrio is larger than life as Wilson Fisk/The Kingpin. In the comic books, he's among Daredevil's and Spiderman's greatest foes. Living up to one of the most iconic bad guys in comic-dom is no easy task, but he pulls it off brilliantly.



Luke Cage (Netflix 2016-2018): *Luke Cage* was the first

Black superhero to be featured as a protagonist and title character of a comic book (first appearing in 1972). This is

an updated version, with Mike Colter in the title role as a man with super strength and unbreakable, bulletproof skin (caused by a sabotaged medical experiment when he was in prison). Colter is excellent as the quietly confident but reluctant hero. He has loads of charisma, and looks like a superhero even when he's just walking around in a hoodie.

After the wrongfully convicted Luke is released from prison, he tries to live a quiet life in Harlem, New York. That, of course, doesn't go as planned, as bad guys, some linked to his past, force him out of the shadows to fight crime and corruption in his city. After taking on and beating down some bad characters, he is celebrated as "the Hero of Harlem." But new threats emerge, forcing him to question what it really means to be a hero.

Luke Cage is different from other superhero series (and most television dramas in general), with its mostly Black cast, as well as numerous cultural references and visual images – bringing a socially conscious and fresh perspective to a genre in which it has been sorely lacking.

The series has a remarkable cast and soundtrack. Mahershala Ali plays the season 1 main villain, nicknamed Cottonmouth, a criminal and local club owner. Alfre Woodard is his cousin Mariah, a corrupt councilwoman promising a new Harlem Renaissance, who takes over his criminal empire in season 2. Ramping up the danger quotient is Luke's psychopathic half-brother, known as Diamondback (Erik LaRay Harvey), a powerful arms dealer who framed Cage for the crime that originally sent him to prison. Theo Rossi plays Shades, a menacing, street-smart criminal and ally of Mariah, who also has ties to Cage's past, and is a key player in both seasons.

Mustafa Shakir plays another baddie known as “Bushmaster,” who has chemically-induced enhanced abilities of his own. He moves into Harlem trying to take over Mariah’s territory. Luke teams up with detective and one-time lover, Misty Knight (Simone Missick) to take them down. Also helping Luke is former nurse, Claire Temple (Rosario Dawson), who has taken to helping heroes with enhanced abilities. The ending of season 2 made me want to see what would have happened in a third season, but unfortunately it was not to be.

Jessica Jones and ***The Punisher*** are also excellent and highly recommended, but they ended their runs in 2019, so are not reviewed here. ***The Defenders*** miniseries, brings together Daredevil, Jessica Jones, Luke Cage, and Iron Fist, who team up to save new York from destruction (worth a look only if you are a fan of one of these heroes).



Travelers ([Netflix 2016-2018](#)): Hundreds of years in the future, the last remnants of humans discover how to send their consciousnesses back through time, into people of the 21st century. These “travelers” take over people’s bodies so they can work in teams to carry out missions designed to save humanity from its horrible future.

While stories about people trying to change the past to save the future is a well-worn sci-fi trope, the acting and storytelling here are first-rate, and it’s worth a look. Eric McCormack leads an ensemble cast that includes, MacKenzie Porter, Jared Abrahamson, Reilly Dolman, and Nesta Cooper.



Bad Blood (Netflix 2017-2018): Canadian mob drama based on a true story about a Montreal-based Italian crime family. They consolidate various mob factions – Haitians, bikers, the Irish – to completely control Montreal, the entry point for much of the drug trade going to the Northeast United

States. Things run smoothly until other gangsters try to muscle in on their turf.

Anthony LaPaglia and Paul Sorvino bring their “gangster cred” as heads of the Rizzuto crime family, as does the always interesting Enrico Colantoni as the family’s consigliere. Kim Coates (*Sons of Anarchy*) shines as their ambitious and often brutal right-hand man. Two seasons are available. No word yet on a potential third season. Kim Coates has said another season is currently on the backburner, but he’s pushing for a third and final season.



Bodyguard (Netflix 2018-): British television hit centering around a special forces war veteran with PTSD (Richard Madden), who is now a police sergeant in London. After thwarting a terrorist attack, he is assigned to protect the home secretary, a controversial politician.

You’ll be hooked after the first 15 minutes or so as the intensity of the opening continues unabated for the entire six-episode run. Complicated, absorbing, violent, and perfectly paced, it will hold you and keep you guessing from start to finish. After a long delay, a second season was finally confirmed for some time in 2021 or 2022.