

# DVDs: Brilliant "Bill Hicks," Dope "Dope," and Hilarious "Monty Python and the Holy Grail"

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TV shows, art house fare, silly summer blockbusters. Keep on scrolling down, because you're sure to find a movie, tv show or documentary you're interested in while looking at the biggest DVD/BluRay roundup ever!

**BILL HICKS: THE COMPLETE COLLECTION** (DVD; Comedy Dynamics)

**MR WARMTH! DON RICKLES: THE ULTIMATE TV COLLECTION** (\$69.95 DVD; Time Life)

Few stand-up comics get a definitive boxed set like the one devoted to the late Bill Hicks. Few deserve it. Richard Pryor. George Carlin. And here, Hicks. If you wonder how or why he belongs alongside such iconic figures, clearly you need to purchase this set. If you know he belongs with them, you might still buy this set: it contains every official comedy album, every official DVD, plus four more CDs of audio and six DVD performances for a solid ten hours of shows, extras and more. It's a labor of love overseen by his family and out at a very low price. Granted, the packaging is bare bones, but in this case you're here for the material.

Hicks was a caustic, very smart comic (think Eddie Izzard, Carlin, etc.) who pushed boundaries. David Letterman famously championed him and then even more infamously wouldn't allow Hicks to do material that should have been approved (transferring a live act to primetime TV was always a negotiation; in this case, Letterman blew it). It's one of the few blots on Letterman's public career as a host and a pity; he made what amends he could years later. But if it brought more attention to Hicks as a smart, subversive talent, maybe that's not the worse thing in the world. Hicks died just four months later (he had pancreatic cancer) and since his death his fame has skyrocketed in the UK, where notably stand-up has much more prominence in the popular culture and actually encourages intelligent, scathing commentary, rather than just serving as a launching pad to sitcoms. He's a unique, remarkable talent that was just getting started. Some day they'll make a movie about his life; just don't look for Denis Leary to play the lead.

Don Rickles, in contrast, has enjoyed a long and unexpectedly enduring career. Many comics deal with hecklers. But Rickles WAS a heckler from beginning to end. He made his bones with a famously ballsy joke: Frank Sinatra walked into the relatively unknown comic's set and Rickles joked, "Make yourself at home, Frank. Punch somebody!" When Sinatra laughed, Rickles was a made man. In the right context (talk shows with the right host) and in notably small doses, he could be priceless. In the wrong context (an hour long set, movies, TV sitcoms), he was not. Rickles is an off-the-cuff master of zingers. Sure, he probably had the zingers stored away for the right moment. But knowing when to set off those depth charges, when to push the envelope and then push it again is a genuine gift. As Rickles got older, his sense of what was boundary pushing and what was just out-dated "outrageousness" may have dulled. But he's a unique comic.

Fans of his will surely be pleased with what is by necessity a grab-bag of stuff. (Rickles has been working for more than sixty years and an ideal compilation would draw from so many diverse sources (countless episodes of Carson and Letterman, for starters) that it will be nigh in impossible until copyright expires and someone with a passion wants to dive into hundreds of hours of footage to pull out the best. What we have here are several TV specials, clips from various shows, a TV Land award ceremony with his acceptance speech and all three seasons of the Rickles' sitcom C.P.O. Sharkey, as good a proof as any that he was not a star in the making. On

a sitcom, Rickles should be the cranky neighbor who swings by for a quick jab and then disappears. Imagine how good he could have been as a regular at Cheers, skewering Sam and Diane with a line or two before disappearing into his beer. In a movie, Rickles should not be the star: he should be somewhere two or three spots away from the lead, with the occasional crack. Witness his marvelous voice work on Toy Story. None of this is to limit Rickles or what he accomplished; it's simply recognition of the particular gift he had and how best to show it off. See a few choice clips of Rickles and you'll be astonished at his pointed retorts. Spend ten or so hours slogging through a bad sitcom and so-so specials and you might be mistaken into thinking Mr. Warmth leads you cold. You'd be wrong and I'm sure Rickles would know exactly what to say to that.

**PIXELS** (\$45.99 3-D BluRay combo; Sony)

**DOPE** (\$34.98 BluRay; Universal)

**SOUTHPAW** (\$39.95 BluRay combo; Anchor Bay)

**PAPER TOWNS** (\$39.99 BluRay; Fox)

**A PIGEON SAT ON A BRANCH REFLECTING ON EXISTENCE** (EST/VOD; Magnolia)

**GÜEROS** (\$34.95 BluRay; Kino Lorber)

**MAGIC MIKE XXL** (\$44.95 BluRay; Warner Bros.)

Some foolish people think Adam Sandler is washed up; he's retreated to Netflix because his movie career is tanking! Or so the thinking goes. In fact, Sandler is more popular than ever. His movies have exploded overseas in the past decade and indeed looking at worldwide box office he's actually doing better than ever. Netflix was smart to sign him up, at least commercially. And check out Pixels -- it's not that bad! Faint praise, but the truth for anyone not expecting Ghostbusters redux. What critics are really responding to is not popularity, but that most of Sandler's movies simply haven't been good for a long time. For a brief period, he was making everything from The Wedding Singer to Punch Drunk Love and some perfectly amiable comedies. Lately, those comedies are pretty witless (Pixels notably better than many), but by god they've been popular.

Dope was a fun little surprise, an urban updating of Risky Business (i.e. it stars a black teenager instead of a white one). It's not as good as that genuinely brilliant movie (make more films, Paul Brickman!) but it is fun, well-cast and occasionally a hoot. It's about Malcolm (the appealing Shameik Moore) a geek obsessed with 90s hip-hop. He accidentally comes across a pile of dope and must juggle crime lords, trying to get a date for prom and an upcoming interview for Harvard in one crazy 24 hour period. It's sweet, witty and marks both Moore and writer-director Rick Famuwiya as talents to watch.

As for Southpaw, I remember the savvy PR of Harvey Weinstein more than the paint-by-numbers storyline of this boxing drama. Jake Gyllenhaal is a boxer too quick with his fists; he loses his wife and custody of his baby girl and must start from the bottom (albeit minus a training in a meat locker scene) to win it all back. Gyllenhaal is indeed a terrific actor and he really was robbed last year by not even being nominated for Nightcrawler (he should have won). But this rote drama (you can plot it out after the first ten minutes) won't be the one to bring him new glory. It doesn't even get him back in the ring, despite his considerable appeal. Still, it's good to see him notch a solid commercial performance.

Paper Towns however didn't do remotely as well as The Fault In Our Stars. No one expected to catch lightning in a bottle twice, but because both were based on novels by John Green, someone surely was hoping they might. In fact, it's a better film than that one, if only because the book is better. Here a high school geek is off on the impulsive road trip of his dreams to try and track down the mysterious and beautiful girl of his dreams who gave him one wild, prank-filled night and then disappeared. Nat Wolff is an engaging hero and to be fair the mysterious Margo is out of the picture for most of the movie. Still, I think casting Cara Delevigne was a mistake. Sure, he insists she's the most beautiful girl in the world but that's teenage hormones. Casting an actress who actually looks like a runway model rather than an actual teen girl next door who's cute but you know, somewhat real throws his obsession out of whack. Instead of being universal, you feel it's more like the story of growing up

next to a young Brooke Shields. That's not so interesting. (Even though Brooke is very well read and would have made a cool neighbor.)

In a completely different tone, the new movie *A Pigeon Sat On A Branch...* is arthouse fare of the highest order. I almost never cover movies unless they're coming out on DVD or BluRay. In this case, I made an exception because Roy Andersson is a rare and beguiling talent. His new movie is the finale of a loosely connected trilogy (you certainly don't need to see the first two in order to watch this. It has no plot or characters in common; just a sensibility. *Songs From The Second Floor* remains his masterpiece, an absurdist bit of lunacy composed of one-take shots, each vignette a self-contained, deadpan masterpiece. You, *The Living* is the second film, a similar high-wire act that was less successful but still so unique you were happy to see it. *Pigeon* completes Andersson's bizarre trilogy with a sense of satisfaction that raises up the second one by its presence since we know the original wasn't a fluke. Anyone from fans of Buster Keaton to the most avant garde artists will find something to savor here. Are you bold? Adventurous? Prove it.

Practically the definition of "promising," *Güeros* is the debut of writer-director Alonso Ruizpalacios. Tomás (an excellent Sebastián Aguirre) is a handful and his mother gives up, sending the teenager to stay with his older brother in Mexico City. Things do not go more smoothly for Tomás there, to say the least. It's a visually strong (good work by cinematographer Damian Garcia), funny and admittedly scattershot work that tries to do seventeen things and actually does about half of them. Fun on its own but definitely names to keep in your backpocket.

I don't know what's funnier: the fact that some people said *Magic Mike XXL* was "disappointing" or the fact that some others defended it as some sort of post-feminist example of female empowerment and male sensitivity. Were expectations really raised by the sillier than silly and fairly incomprehensible original? And should we really waste time reading too much social commentary into a not-very-good movie, however much we may champion male objectification as a valid response to female objectification or just good clean fun in its own right? Channing Tatum looks good, dances well and keeps things moving in a sequel I for one thought was less hackneyed and more fun than the original. It's a matter of degree of course and neither is a movie I'd watch again. But a road trip where male strippers decide to stop doing routines to please others and in fact create stripper routines to empower themselves and flush out unwanted demons and empower themselves. Bring it on! It's all nonsense and peaked too soon at a bayou nightclub for sistas overseen by Rome (a fun Jada Pinkett Smith). (Frankly, the routines at the big finale were too long on elaborate set-ups and short on actual sexiness.) But a disappointment? I mean, they took off their shirts. If they didn't, sure you could be angry. But otherwise, it's like complaining about the writing in those Penthouse letters....

**MY FAIR LADY 50TH ANNIVERSARY** (\$39.99 BluRay; Paramount)

**BIG EDEN 15TH ANNIVERSARY** (\$24.95 BluRay; Wolfe)

**MY OWN PRIVATE IDAHO** (\$39.95 BluRay; Criterion)

**DIARY OF A LOST GIRL** (\$29.95 BluRay; Kino Lorber)

**REBELS OF THE NEON GOD** (\$29.95 DVD; Big World Pictures)

**I WANT TO LIVE!** (\$10.95 DVD; Kino Lorber)

**MONTY PYTHON AND THE HOLY GRAIL 40TH ANNIVERSARY** (\$19.99 BluRay; Sony)

I've got a hate-hate relationship with the movie adaptation of *My Fair Lady*. It's a crime that Julie Andrews didn't get to recreate her stage performance. On the other hand, she got the delightful *Mary Poppins* (and an Oscar). Besides, I assume even with Andrews that the movie version directed with plodding competence by George Cukor would have remained an embalmed monstrosity, seemingly dragging one of the greatest and wittiest musicals of all time through its glacial, numbingly unfunny paces. Cukor is a great director, but not of musicals. (*A Star Is Born* is a drama, essentially, and his last great feature.) Of course, for those who treasure it, this is a lovely set, filled with extras and looking very impressive on BluRay. Not that I watched the whole movie again,

but that Ascot scene certainly pops.

Big Eden might have some of the same audience as *My Fair Lady*. This very mainstream romantic drama stars Ayre Gross in probably the best role of his career: a gay man who returns home to care for his ailing grandfather, thus confronting the high school crush he never got over and (unexpectedly) a new love. Gay roles and gay characters were proliferating in popular culture by 2000. Nonetheless, a sweet, unaffected tale of coming to terms with sexuality and staying open to the promise of love struck a chord with gay audiences. Now, it's got a 15th anniversary release on BluRay with notable extras, including new interviews with the cast and writer-director Thomas Bezucha. You need only spend a few minutes online to see what a cult favorite it is for those in the know and this release should give it new life.

A far quirkier gay drama can be found in director Gus Van Sant's oddball male hustler drama/Shakespearean reboot. Yes, it's *Henry IV* redux combined with the very modern tale of a gay hustler (*River Phoenix*), such a lost soul that he can drift off into dreams (or perhaps narcolepsy) at the oddest moments. In *My Own Private Idaho*, he falls hard for the Prince Hal-like Joaquin Phoenix (rarely better), the wealthy son of a dynasty who really rebels against old dad by sleeping with men for money even though he doesn't need money and isn't even gay (or bi). It's a thoroughly unique movie, brilliantly shot and containing two riveting performances by its young leads. Your heart will break all over again for the loss of Phoenix any time you watch this. And as a bonus it features the hands-down wittiest capturing of a sex scene I'll ever witness. Criterion does it right, including a new remastering and all the previous excellent extras. Don't get me wrong: I think the movie is frustratingly flawed. But by god it has the courage of its convictions and goes all the way out there. And the stuff that is good is so good.

If you miss Phoenix, just watch *Diary Of A Lost Girl* and you'll miss Louise Brooks as well. She lived a long and colorful life. But oh what might have been. For varied reasons, Brooks and Hollywood never really mixed. But as Tracy said about Hepburn in one film, there's not a lot there, but what's there is choice. You've got Pandora's Box, the charming *Beggars Of Life* and of course this one, a tale of daring sexuality! (Brooks loved to tease the possibility she was a lesbian, but despite a dalliance with Greta Garbo says she preferred men.) Brooks is a remarkable screen presence, lighting up *Diary's* tale of an innocent girl taken advantage of by men and then punished for it. Anyone watching the last burst of silent film brilliance can easily understand why many bemoaned the switch to sound and how limiting and dully microphones made shooting movies for a while. It would be a few years before technical innovations made sound films as fluid and beautiful as silent. It would be rare when any film ever was as good as the silent greats at their best, films like this one.

Youthful exuberance and talent bursting to get out -- that's what you'll find in *Rebels Of The Neon Gods*, the 1992 debut of Tsai Ming-liang, the Taiwanese director who achieved international prominence with this movie and has repeatedly proven that initial enthusiasm with justified (with *Goodbye Dragon Inn* and *Stray Dogs* just two of many examples). Here the director charts aimless youth, from the son of parents pushing him to excel to two petty thieves and their pretty girlfriend. It all slowly links together in a style Tarantino and Wong Kar-wai would appreciate. The vivid, neon-drenched world of Taiwanese arcades and malls feels like a fever dream but for many the revelation was how contemporary and familiar the story of disaffected youth proved. Essential cinema.

Sure, kids can feel desperate. But they've got nothing on Barbara Graham, the real-life person portrayed in the anti-capital punishment melodrama *I Want To Live!* Susan Hayward won an Oscar for playing the prostitute, small time con artist Graham who wanted to go straight (she came from a broken home) but got caught up with the wrong crowd and was -- she said -- framed for murder. Tough cookies, sweetheart. Director Robert Wise is not keyed in to melodrama; his best work is sober, not sizzling But Hayward won't be denied her chance to emote the hell out of this desperate situation and won the golden statue against an admittedly weak, if star-powered field at the [31st Academy Awards](#).

Monty Python never made a prison drama spoof. But they could have! They could do seemingly anything for a while: a classic TV sketch show, brilliant feature films and finally spinning off into varied other projects ranging from the hilarious Fawlty Towers to Brazil and even a travel show. But as a Python fan, this is the peak for me. One can watch every episode of the TV show, happily. But here is everything one loves about the troupe in one quick and easy dose: seemingly high brown humor mingling with the lowest of low brow humor with a dash of naughtiness, a side dish of meta commentary before meta was cool and a dessert of some catchy songs because the Pythons loved a good sing-along. I would think it helps to have a fondness for the tales of King Arthur, but if you don't you probably will after seeing this send-up of knights and quests and Grails and about a million other things. Not since the Marx Brothers had film comics so gleefully and successfully torn down the fourth wall along with any sense that the normal rules of cinema prevailed. Really, it's even better than we realize: not just funny but fearlessly funny.

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