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Michael Giltz

Posted October 31, 2008 | 04:37 PM (EST)

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DVDs: Down With Bulky And Awkward DVD Boxed Sets!



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OK, one of the great things about DVDs is the chance to buy an entire TV season or even an entire series and collections of movies in one neat package loaded with extras. Unfortunately, studios often think the best way to get people to shell out tons of money for these sets is to package them in giant, bulky designs. I've received DVDs hidden inside suitcases, frat houses, giant ape heads and just about every other shape you can imagine. Sure, it's fun for a minute or two: you coo over the cool design and then dig into the movies/tv shows. But very few

people love any TV show or film series or actor so much that they want to build a shrine to it in their living room or keep a permanent space set aside on the coffee table. Many of these boxed sets can't fit onto a bookshelf or DVD rack and even the ones that technically can are often so bulky they take up an absurd amount of space. Inevitably, the bulky packaging gets tossed out or stowed away uselessly in a closet or attic to gather dust and the actual DVDs get put on the shelf next to all the other ones. So no matter how cool a boxed set may look, 99 times out of 100 most people would prefer a tight, compact boxed set that fits right onto their bookshelf alongside their other DVDs. The real fun is found on the discs, not in the cardboard wrapping.

Here's the deal: if studios want to add a bunch of bulky packaging to convince people a boxed set is worth hundreds of dollars, well ok. (Though we'd rather have a lower price.) But they should ALWAYS include packaging for the DVDs that can be removed and easily stored alongside the fan's other DVDs that they own. Otherwise, that cool apehead just becomes a giant nuisance. Here's a rundown of current and upcoming boxed sets with an emphasis on their packaging. Let's face it, unless you're already a huge fan of *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.* or *Knight Rider*, nothing I say is going to convince you to shell out tons of money. So these reviews (in alphabetical order) are for the fans who wonder what the set is like.

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ABBOTT & COSTELLO: THE COMPLETE UNIVERSAL PICTURES COLLECTION

(\$119.98; Universal) 28 movies (including the tied-up-by-lawyers flick *It Ain't Hay*, the gem *Who Done It* and their all-time classic *Abbott & Costell Meet Frankenstein*). You get a chunk of extras, a commemorative booklet that's pretty substantial and it all comes in a steamer trunk-style box with posters from their movies for decoration. It's too square-shaped to fit onto most DVD racks but might fit onto your bookcase decently. Better yet, the 7 neat volumes inside can come out and fit onto your DVD rack just the way you'd want, albeit with no info about which movie is in which volume on the spine. This brings up another point: whenever possible, studios should BEGIN by releasing an entire boxed set of a series or actor or franchise and THEN put out individual volumes. It's not always possible (in this case because of snags surrounding *It Ain't Hay*) but there's nothing more frustrating than shelling out for every season of an old show long dead and only after they're all out finding that the studio is putting them out again in a nicer complete set with new extras.

ALFRED HITCHCOCK PREMIERE COLLECTION (\$119.98; MGM/Fox) -- Here's a perfect example of a nice looking, lovingly designed set for a major artist that is absolutely impractical and annoying for people who want to actually open the set and watch the movies. You get eight movies (a fairly random seeming selection of titles that range from the early gem *The Lodger* to Hollywood works like *Rebecca*, *Lifeboat*, the very dated (even silly) *Spellbound* and easily one of my favorites of all-time *Notorious* to the flawed late period flick *The Paradine Case* and 1937's *Young And Innocent*, which I'd never even heard of but looks like a lot of fun. A veritable grab bag, but if you don't own them, a compelling set with plenty of extras. But it's encased in a giant plastic box that is very tall and wide -- it won't fit on a bookcase -- unless you want to take up half the shelf and is way too big for DVD racks. Even worse is the photo album book inside in which the DVDs are held on cardboard sheets that are so heavy they dip down outside the bottom of the album whenever you hold it in your hand. It's awkward, a pain to handle, you can't take out the DVDs and shelve them yourself and looks like it'll tear and get damaged in about a minute. To top it off, the only thing that really matters are the DVDs themselves and those had problems, too. Like many other people, I had problems with multiple discs. The DVDs for *Rebecca* and *Spellbound* made a horrid, noisy buzzing sound while in two different players and *Notorious* froze up about an hour in. Hitch was a meticulous craftsman which makes this all the more painful.

NATIONAL LAMPOON'S ANIMAL HOUSE 30th ANNIVERSARY EDITION (\$34.98; Universal) -- The umpteenth release of this slob comedy classic comes in a goofy, kind of stupid "frat house" with a peaked roof that makes it too tall for most DVD shelves but will probably fit on your bookcase and isn't too bulky. It seems even dumber when you pull off the roof and the actual DVD case is rattling around inside. That's a standard size case (hurrah!) but the commemorative "Faber College Yearbook" (a pretty useless booklet with stills from the film) is JUST too big to fit inside the DVD case along with the movie (boo!). If they could dump the packaging and cut \$5 or \$10 off the price (yeah, there's a new documentary but \$35 for a 30 year old movie seems too much), don't they think fans would be happier?

BATMAN: THE COMPLETE ANIMATED SERIES (\$107.92; Warner Bros.) -- A lavish, beautifully designed package that contains all 109 episodes of the excellent 90s animated series. Of all the live action and animated versions of Batman (and I'm including the Christian Bale films) this is the best. If you're not reading the original series or Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight*, this is what you should watch. It comes in a bright, classy plastic cover and the boxed set slides out, revealing subtle detail on the black cover and inside lid. There's a large format booklet and only some flimsy cardboard dividers to spoil the nice inside. But unless you are an incredible geek, where the heck are you gonna put it? It's too big for any bookcase or DVD shelf. But happily, the entire 17 DVDs are contained in two slim volumes that can slide right alongside your current collection. Due November 4.

DALLAS COWBOYS 10 GREATEST GAMES (\$49.98; Warner Bros./NFL) -- Sports fans should be delirious about living in an era when so many classic sporting events are being released on DVD. Some quibble about the games chosen for this set, but 10 complete games, solid extras and all in a slim volume that fits easily on your shelf. No stupid football helmet packaging to make it bulky and useless, for example. Thank goodness.

THE DONNA REED SHOW SEASON ONE (\$39.95; Arts Alliance America) -- Another standard-sized set, this contains all 37 episodes of the solid sitcom that forever immortalized Reed as doing her house work while dressed to the nines and sporting a pearl necklace. (Doesn't every

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domestic goddess do that?) It's not a great show, but it is a decent one that's been burned into our collective memory via reruns. Very modest extras, but frankly I don't care and I think most fans just want easy access to the complete, original episodes as they aired. This set delivers that.

THE 4400: THE COMPLETE SERIES (\$99.98; Paramount) -- Another well-packaged, standard-sized set containing 15 DVDs with all four seasons of this precursor to *Heroes*, including a few extras including hints at what direction they might have gone in if the show hadn't been cancelled. Yes, some people bought the single season sets as they came out, but since that's inevitable with a new series (as opposed to classic TV), there's no reason to complain when all of them are collected in one neat set and some new extras are thrown in. Really, fans of *Heroes* should check this out even though I still think it would have been better as a season-long telenovela instead of an ongoing show.

THE GREGORY PECK FILM COLLECTION (\$59.98; Universal) -- Two classic Gregory Peck films (*To Kill A Mockingbird* and *Cape Fear*) along with four more movies new to DVD, all of them very solid (*Arabesque*, *Captain Newman M.D.*, *Mirage* and *The World In His Arms*). Sets built around an actor or director are increasingly popular, but too often they bundle all the movies together. In this case, each film gets its own trim DVD case (and EVERY studio should convert to the slim DVD cases -- there is no point in the bulkier ones at all). I don't know about you, but if I'm looking for the movie *Captain Newman M.D.*, I'm gonna start with the "c's" not with the "p's" and this set lets me do that. Due November 4.

THE INCREDIBLE HULK: THE COMPLETE SERIES (\$149.98; Universal) -- Another giant, coffee-table sized cardboard box with a nifty, bulging plastic logo for the "Hulk" in *The Incredible Hulk*. No muss or fuss inside, just slim DVD sets (!) containing all five seasons that can be easily placed on any shelf and then you just toss the cardboard box container it came in. I do admit my childhood fancy for this show and Bill Bixby isn't quite as strong today. He's good but the show got way too cartoonish by the time it ended. Still, I'd rather watch this than either of the movies any day.

KNIGHT RIDER: THE COMPLETE COLLECTION (\$139.98; Universal) -- Am I dissing studios for coming up with clever packaging? Yes I am, actually. Instead of wasting money on elaborate packages that become annoying dust collectors or make fans have to keep these DVDs far away from all their other ones, studios should just be a little practical and think about how people actually use these sets. So *Knight Rider* has a sleek black box with a lid that flips open and a nifty red light display that plays theme music and flashes lights when you press a button. Sure, it made me smile, but not as much as the slim DVD cases containing all four seasons that could be immediately placed on my bookcase. Bonus features include the 2000 TV movie sequel and other stuff.

THE LITTLE RASCALS: THE COMPLETE COLLECTION (\$89.98; Genius) -- This long-awaited set should be called "The Complete Hal Roach Talkie Collection" since it contains all 80 of the talkie shorts featuring The Little Rascals, released from 1929-1938 and repackaged and shown in reruns ever since. You get a very nice looking but compact set that fits onto any DVD shelf or bookcase (proof that sets don't need to be bulky to be impressive) and some ok extras. Still, the shorts don't even match some of the laser disc collections I had years ago when it comes to picture and sound quality. Casual fans and people with kids to entertain will be happy but those looking for a real restoration or even the entire 200+ shorts in the series will have to wait.

THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E.: THE COMPLETE SERIES (\$199.92; Warner Bros.) -- An identical reissue of the complete series boxed set that came out about a year ago with one key difference: the nifty suitcase it came in has been upgraded from flimsy cardboard that tore about two minutes after I got it to much sturdier packaging that looks like it will last. Of course, unless you plan to keep this set in the attic or closet with your other luggage, the really important fact is that each season inside is contained in a classic-sized DVD case, this time with full info on the side so it can be stored on your shelf and you won't wonder what it is. The tongue-in-cheek spy show is pretty fascinating for a case study in a series that let success go to its head and then righted itself a bit just as the party ended. Great fun and lots of extras.

MYSTERY SCIENCE THEATER 3000: 20TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION (\$69.99; Shout) is available in a standard sized boxed set that fits trimly on your shelf (hurrah!) or a limited edition that is exceptionally chubby. It's sort of a super-sized tin box, fatter than a lunch box but able to fit

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on a bookcase or DVD shelf, so there is that to be said for it. It contains flimsy posters of the movies that are roasted, a figurine of "Crow T. Robot" and the actual set, which has four movies in individual slim cases so you can keep them together on *MST3K* or put them under *Future War*, *Laserblast*, etc. Fun extras and of course the movies and commentary themselves are very funny indeed. A simple idea (hey, let's record the comments we shout out when making fun of bad old movies) perfectly executed. One further grumble about the tin casing: I found it absurdly hard to pry the DVD set out of it and even cut myself. That's no fun.

ROUTE 66 COMPLETE SECOND SEASON (\$49.98; Roxbury) -- An iconic TV series, *Route 66* has had a very checkered DVD history. Season One, Volume One (it's always annoying when they put out half a season) contained decent prints and was my first real chance to watch this show. Volume Two, however, rather bizarrely decided to crop off the top and bottom of the picture to make the show faux "widescreen," which meant sometimes the actors had their heads cut off. Season Two, however, seems complete, looks to have decent prints, isn't arbitrarily cropped and contains some period commercials as extras. I haven't watched every episode, but the show is earnest fun, with great guest stars. And it's all contained in a compact boxed set that fits right onto your shelf. Due out November 4.

THE SIMPSONS ELEVENTH SEASON (\$49.98; Fox) -- *The Simpsons* have been some of the best boxed sets in TV history, filled with tons of extras and commentaries and everything else a fanboy or girl could want. But every once in a while they release a limited edition bit of packaging that is bulky and annoying -- in this case it's Krusty's face bulging out of the set. But the almost laughably bad kicker is that the DVDs themselves are contained in an accordion-like cardboard case that keeps the DVDs themselves virtually invisible and almost IMPOSSIBLE to pull out. I am not exaggerating. It's so godawful you'd swear the set was released on April Fool's Day. Only a doofus like Homer or a prankster like Bart could have come up with something as miserable as this. The show itself was still chugging along nicely as far as the actual episodes are concerned, but you'll have to take my word for it since it'll take you days to actually get them out of their casing.

THE WILD WILD WEST: THE COMPLETE TV SERIES (\$129.98; Paramount) -- I saved the worst for last, in many ways. Studios often insist they can only put out one season of an old show (or even HALF a season) because they don't know if anyone will buy them and they can't spend the money to restore an entire series just to find out. It must be true since great shows like *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *Hill Street Blues* and *St. Elsewhere* are stalled after just putting out a few seasons. And obviously if a show is eight or ten or 15 seasons long, no one expects them to necessarily begin with a lavish complete boxed set. But any show that ran four or fewer seasons that's worth putting out on DVD is worth putting out first in a complete boxed set. Then you can release a "greatest hits" compilation for casual fans or even individual seasons. *The Wild Wild West* got it almost completely wrong. They put out complete seasons (good) and released the entire show (good). But now they're putting out a complete boxed set and they're including the two TV reunion movies which by all rights should have also been available on the season four set. Only hardcore fans would buy all four seasons and why should they be punished for buying them as they came out? They're the ONLY people who care about the lame TV reunion movies and shouldn't be forced to buy the complete collection to get them. But here's the bitter truth that might make them feel vindicated: the packaging on the boxed set is so ludicrously cheap and shoddy, they wouldn't want it anyway. It's a bulky, coffee table-sized box that won't fit anywhere except in your closet. The "decorative" element inside is a colored strip that recreates the animated opening sequence of the series: it's a thin cardboard strip glued to the top of the inside and was peeling away the moment I opened the set. The episode guide is a glorified pamphlet thrown on top. Worst of all, the four seasons are not contained in standard DVD boxes the way the individual seasons were sold. (Normally, studios just plop those babies into the collection or at most repackage them into slimmer cases.) In this case, the DVDs are contained in two flimsy, cardboard packages that are shaped sort of like boots (I guess). The DVDs flop around inside, are really hard to pull out individually and keep in order and the whole thing is ready to get torn or fall apart at any moment. This sort of bulky, shoddy packaging that no sane person would ever want to deal with is exactly the sort of travesty people should reject. When it comes to DVD boxed sets, bigger is rarely better and cheap packaging won't last, but the memories of annoyed customers will linger on.

Will you buy any of these boxed sets or are there any lavish boxed sets you love or hate?

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DVDs? Hmmm. I'd rather get the collection in a nice small package w/ any booklet small, a nice box with a memory stick. Packaging could be minimal, and it's all we need. Transfer the data onto our other systems, and store the stick - it's small enough.

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Heck I throw away everything but the discs, and store the discs in Unikeep binders anyway. My collection is only about 3 feet across this way, instead of 30'+.

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I tried that with CDs and DVDs but every time I got a new release it meant endless reshuffling of the pages. And the CDs I store that way always seem a little "out of sight, out of mind." But boy do they take up a lot less space. I'm envious.

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Hi. I agree with this post completely. Another good example is the "Seinfeld" complete series in the Refrigerator box a few years ago. I guess the idea is that the unique packaging may spur "point of sale" purchases, but they are completely useless when trying to store them at home. But, in some cases, these unique boxes may hurt sales in that people don't want the crazy packaging.

Here is a suggestion: when DVD firms sell these types of sets, include a coupon or form that can be mailed to the DVD manufacturer which the buyer can mail in and get a regular DVD box set case that

can easily be stored. That way, they can buy the set knowing that they can still get a "regular" case.

Thanks for the post. BTW, I am still waiting for the complete "Larry Sanders" series on DVD!

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They never sent the complete Seinfeld for review so I didn't get a chance to check it out. Thanks for the info. The coupon for folks who want regular DVDs is a nice idea from our end but probably too cumbersome for them to employ. It's not like they ever deal with customers one on one. The best solution would be if even bulky boxed sets included DVD cases w proper packaging, like the Knight Rider and Incredible Hulk sets I covered. And I can't wait for the complete Larry Sanders either.

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I love the Star Trek sets and the boxes are cool.

I always pick up the Simpsons.

I'll probably pick up The Little Rascals. I've always loved that series.

IF finances permit, I'll give the Batman Animated Series. It's a pretty nifty cartoon series.

Can't think of anything else right now.

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