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Michael Giltz

Freelance writer and raconteur
Posted: October 4, 2010 03:47 PM

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DVDs: *Ellery Queen*, Rush, Casey Affleck and More

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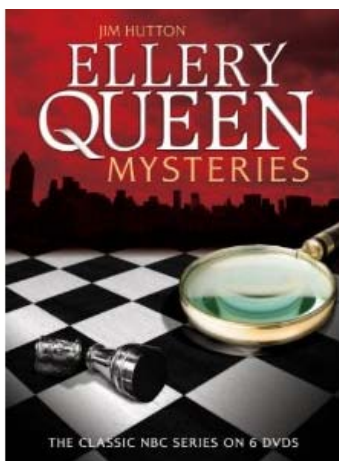
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Memory can play tricks on you. I fondly recalled the TV series *Ellery Queen Mysteries* (\$59.98; E1), with a tall gangly Jim Hutton (father of Timothy) shambling his way through an episode and then turning to

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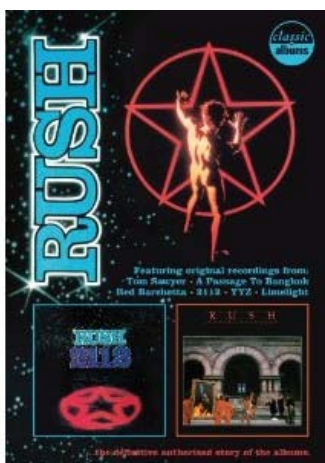
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the camera (to me!) and asking if we'd figured it out. The Ellery Queen mysteries were famous for that: they provided all the clues upfront so that if you were clever and smart, you had just as good a chance of figuring out whodunit as the sleuth. Oddly, Ellery Queen has never been very successful outside of books and short stories, where he's sold a reported 150 million copies and counting. A hit radio series lasted quite a few years, but every TV incarnation was a flop, including this one, which lasted only one season. Still, it's warmly remembered by fans as faithful to the spirit of the books, due in no small part to the easy charm of Hutton and dependable character actor David Wayne as his dad. Dipping into the 22 episodes plus the TV movie pilot, it's very clear this was a warm-up for *Murder She Wrote*: a weekly anthology of crime with a genial host and a raft of guest stars like Don Ameche, Ed McMahon, Sal Mineo, Vincent Price, Joan Collins - you get the idea, the *Love Boat*, *Fantasy Island* sort of gang. Pretty mild stuff, in other words. A solid presentation, with modest extras like an interview with co-creator William Link.



GET HIM TO THE GREEK (\$39.98 BluRay; \$29.98 regular DVD) -- I do not get Russell Brand. But this spin-off from *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* played and played in movie theaters, obviously getting great word of mouth. So when I was in the mood for silly fun and ready to give Brand another try, I knew it was time for this comedy about a hapless record company employee (Jonah Hill) who must play nanny with a drinking and drugging rock star (Brand) and get him to a massively important concert on time. When the movie began with a feeble rock parody (showing Brand in a pathetically "important" video called "African Child") I knew I was in trouble. It did not get funnier as the rock star loosens up the employee and the employee gives some heartfelt advice to the rock star about how to live his life and lessons are learned all around. By and large a time waster, some modest pleasure can be had on the fringes, namely Sean Combs pretty amusing as a record company exec and Elizabeth Moss of *Mad Men* sexily appealing as Hill's girlfriend. I dread Brand in the *Arthur* remake more and more.



RUSH CLASSIC ALBUMS: 2112 AND MOVING PICTURES (\$14.98; Eagle Vision) -- It's a banner year for Rush, what with the acclaimed documentary film *Beyond The Lighted Stage* and this look at their two most important albums. The Classic Albums series is a dependable one for fans of the acts involved and the formula is simple. A brief rundown of the band and their history is provided as a lead-in to discuss one or two of their landmark albums, including fresh interviews with band members, a rock critic or two, record label execs, producers and engineers and so on. If you're a fan of the band involved, you can be sure the DVDs won't disappoint and most likely will dig up some info you didn't know before. (Finally, I know why that instrumental is called "YYZ.") Of course, it helps when the band is articulate

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and smart, as Rush is in spades and the commentary ranges from pressure from the record company to breakdowns of individual tracks that reveal interesting little flourishes. Extras include extended interviews, some new and classic performance footage that doubles the running time to two hours.



THE KILLER INSIDE ME (\$29.98 BluRay and \$19.98 regular; IFC) -- Casey Affleck is obviously flustered and surprised by the reaction to his performance art piece/mockumentary *I'm Still Here* with Joaquin Phoenix. But he should take comfort in the fact that if you want to talk about the movies of 2010 you need to see his directorial debut and you need to see his work on *The Killer Inside Me*, a darker than dark noir based on the Jim Thompson novel about a small-town sheriff who has to cover up one murder with more murders and -- more distressingly -- finds he doesn't mind so very much. Affleck has a gift for playing unpleasant, awkward characters and that's used to full effect here in scenes that are uncomfortably violent in a disturbing, unflinching manner that divided critics and audiences but made it one of the most talked about indie films of the year. It's the latest curve ball from the ever-restless director Michael Winterbottom. Clearly not for the delicate, it's noir without the romanticism.



RICH MAN, POOR MAN (\$79.95; A&E) -- This is the miniseries that made a star of Nick Nolte AND a star of the miniseries in general. The first 12 hour miniseries aired during the early months of 1976 and exploded in the ratings, ranking #2 for the year, right behind *All In The Family*. Naturally, it was brought back that fall for a second full season of 22 episodes, though Nick Nolte for obvious reasons was not involved. The Irwin Shaw novel was pure soap opera but the first edition had fun with it, to a degree, jamming the film full of actors like Ed Asner and Steve Allen and Robert Reed to join Nolte and Peter Strauss in the epic tale of two brothers and their struggles from the end of World War II through the Sixties. Though dated on every level (acting, dialogue, production values, etc.) the first miniseries is genius compared to the *Falcon Crest*-level intrigues of season two. As with many A&E TV releases of catalog titles, the video transfer is merely passable but certainly watchable despite wavering video and lines of age noticeable now and then. Fans will savor this release but the uninitiated will soon realize this is no American equivalent to *Upstairs Downstairs*, just trashy fun gussied up as art.

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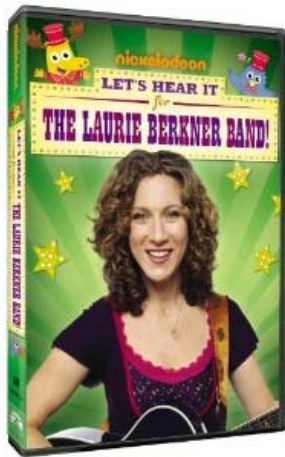
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LET'S HEAR IT FOR THE LAURIE BERKNER BAND! (\$16.99; Paramount) -- Wildly popular fixture on *Jack's Big Music Show*, Laurie Berkner pulls together some (but by no means all) of her videos found there and elsewhere on Nick Jr and Noggin. You get 16 songs, intro'd by Moose and Zee with encouragement to get up and dance along, as well as four more music videos. "Rocketship Run," "Victor Vito," the hard to argue with "I'm Me and You're You" are some of the cuts included, all of which are catchy and clever enough to keep parents engaged as well.



I'M GONNA EXPLODE (\$24.98; IFC) -- This "Mexican New Wave" drama follows two misfit teens who pretend to run away from home but really camp out on the roof of the boy's residence while his corrupt politician father and her easily distraught mother seek them out all over the country. Writer-director Gerardo Naranjo has a pretty good eye and a certain talent for stringing out an entire film from this very modest premise, which barely develops more than I've described here. The boy is sexily confused about his life of privilege and the girl is blunt and no-nonsense but we don't know much more about them at the end than we did at the beginning and they certainly don't seem like star-crossed lovers a la *Romeo & Juliet*. Late in the film, when they crash a birthday party and the boy is a boorish drunk, we really start to question liking him at all. Maybe he is just a spoiled kid. Then the movie lurches into unearned melodrama that's utterly out of step with the previous 95 minutes and they lost me for good. Maybe Naranjo will develop more, but this is a part-boring, part-pretentious Godardian riff.

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MY FAVORITE SPY (\$24.95; Olive Films/Paramount) -- Olive Films is an imprint that's been diving into the Paramount vaults and rescuing the movies that the studio hasn't released for one reason or another. After months of releases, it's safe to say that Olive is a dependable label. Their movies have no extras to speak of usually (something I personally don't care about, frankly). But the important point is that they take good care to present a decent print. I wish the price point were lower but they're probably doing what they can to eke out a profit on movies that are curiosities even to most film buffs. So if the movie interests you, rest assured the quality should be fine. This Bob Hope vehicle will hopefully prove one of their best sellers. It's Hope in fine form as a cowardly comic dragooned into the spy business and (growllllllll) happily paired off with Hedy Lamarr. It's all handled ably by Norman Z. McLeod and ranks as one of Hope's solo best. Also out is the Danny Kaye vehicle *Knock On Wood*, a so-so movie star biopic *Harlow*, late period Bette Davis in *Where Love Has Gone* and Kirk Douglas slumming it in the gloriously tacky *Jacqueline Susann's Once Is Not Enough*.

TV ROUNDUP

TV sets come out in such a deluge, it's hard to keep up. Here's a rundown of the latest.

Petty Blue (\$19.99; Paramount/CMT) -- This won't interest non-fans, but for people who love NASCAR and know the Petty family legacy, this Kevin Costner-narrated documentary is a fine look at the men who literally made NASCAR from its earliest beginnings to its heyday with Richard Petty and into the future.

The Lord Peter Wimsey Mysteries Set Two (\$49.99; Acorn) -- I do enjoy Lord Peter Wimsey (the books are splendid) and Ian Carmichael is good in these three mysteries, all of which are four-parters of 50 minutes each. But since we had this series in a complete (if bulky and expensive) boxed set, it seems a step back to release them again in multi-set offerings. Anyone who wanted to rent or buy Set One will surely want Set Two and vice versa so why bother doing them alone?

CSI Tenth Season (\$79.99; Paramount) -- Marg Helgenberger becomes the de facto head of the team even as Laurence Fishburne settles more into his role. You get the usual season-long arc of a serial killer, crossover episodes with the other *CSIs* (included in the extras) and the high-tech wizardry that has about as much to do with most police work as Formula 500 racing does to your regular commute.

Legend Of The Seeker 2nd Season (\$45.99; ABC Studios) -- As so often happens, this show - based on the much darker *Sword Of Truth* novels by Terry Goodkind -- started to find its way in season two just as the plug was pulled. A little more action, a little more freedom to hew closer to the books (rather than create standalone episodes) and a realization that this was NOT *Hercules* or *Xena* all helped. Not great but fantasy pickings are slim on TV.

Magic & Bird: A Courtship Of Rivals (\$19.98; HBO) -- Earvin Johnson and Larry Bird comprised one of the great rivalries in all of sports and that's lovingly captured in this look at how the bitterest of on court enemies later become the closest of friends.

Law & Order: Special Victims Unit Year Eleven (\$59.98; Universal) -- Since this L&O has always delved more into private lives, SVU has peaked much sooner than the original and it's time to call it a day. Guest star arcs from Sharon Stone and Christine Lahti only emphasize that. Still, Christopher Meloni and Mariska Hargitay give it dignity.

SNL: The Best Of Eddie Murphy/Adam Sandler (\$14.98 each; Lionsgate) -- New editions of these greatest hits compilations, both with an extra 20 minutes of sketches added in. It's been a long time since they were originally released, still it's a shame the "extra" footage wasn't just included in the first place. But if you're a fan and didn't buy the earlier set, it's pretty much fool proof. If you did buy the earlier set and aren't certain if you should buy it again, ask yourself this question: do you know all the words to The Hanukkah Song?" If so, buy it.

Thanks for reading. Michael Giltz is the cohost of **Showbiz Sandbox**, a weekly pop culture podcast that reveals the industry take on entertainment news of the day and features top journalists and opinion makers as guests. It's **available free on iTunes**. Visit **Michael Giltz at his website** and his **daily blog**. Download his podcast of celebrity interviews and his radio show, also called **Popsurfing** and also available for free on iTunes. **Link to him on Netflix** and gain access to thousands of ratings and reviews.

NOTE: Michael Giltz is provided with free copies of DVDs to consider for review. He typically does not guarantee coverage and invariably receives far more screeners and DVDs than he can cover each week. Also, Michael Giltz freelances as a writer of DVD copy (the text that appears on the back of DVDs) for some titles released by IFC and other subsidiaries of MPI. It helps pay the rent, but does not obligate me in any way to speak positively or negatively of their titles.

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Scott Mendelson: 2010 in Review: Favorite Films of the Year
Below is a list of fourteen of my favorite pictures that were released in 2010, plus a final nod to my favorite film of 2010. They are not necessarily 'the best,' as there are plenty of allegedly great films that I missed but they are all pretty great.

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Woody Allen fans might be interested in "My Favorite Spy." Allen has often cited Hope as a major influence. In movies like this one, along with Hope's other "My Favorite" pictures ("Blonde," "Brunette") and "Monsieur Beaucaire," you can see it. With "Sleeper" and "Love and Death," especially, Allen paid homage to Hope's bragging coward who fancies himself a ladies' man--even using some of Hope's physical mannerisms. "Love and Death" is basically a Bob Hope movie for Russian Lit. majors.

Haven't thought of the Ellery Queen show since I was a kid. I remember the mysteries being cleverly worked out, but that the character of Queen was yes, "genial," yet not at all compelling in the way that Levinson and Link's greatest creation, Columbo, was. The show was more like an amusing brainteaser, like a crossword puzzle or a game of chess (love that DVD cover artwork), than a drama. I also recall John Hillerman, one of my favorite character players, being his usual urbane self as Queen's arch-nemesis.

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Thanks for reading and commenting. You're absolutely right about Woody Allen's love for Bob Hope and how he modeled early roles on Hope's persona. It's also more fun to watch My Favorite Spy than most recent Allen movies.

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