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DVDs: How To Watch The Wire

Posted August 15, 2008 | 05:06 PM (EST)

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Okay, The Wire's fifth and final season is now out on DVD (\$59.99; HBO) and you've heard all the rave reviews. So what are you waiting for? If you're a fan of intelligent, hard-hitting dramas with complex storylines and compelling characters, you simply must take the time to watch The Wire. Maybe Murder She Wrote is as complex a TV drama as you like to deal with. Maybe you found Friday Night Lights a bit too raw and 7th Heaven is more your speed. But if

you've been absorbed by The Sopranos or Hill Street Blues or NYPD Blue or The Shield or Deadwood, you need to watch The Wire. It truly is one of the best TV dramas of all time. But you knew that -- you've seen the reviews. Here are a few pointers for diving into this and really any drama available on DVD.

1. Wait til the current season is over -- The Wire has shut down for good, so you have the great pleasure of sitting down to watch Season One, knowing exactly how many seasons the show will run and that they're all waiting for you as soon as you're ready. This is like glancing ahead to see how many pages a novel is before you begin. Reading a 210 page novel is very different from reading an 874 page tome. The Wire includes 60 episodes made over 5 seasons. I understand playing catch-up, diving into a series like Battlestar Galactica mid-run so you can see what the fuss is about. But it's always good to have every extant episode available at your fingertips. Some shows annoyingly wait till right before the new season begins before releasing the previous season on DVD. In the UK, they smartly put a season out on DVD as soon as it's over.

2. Keep your finger on the subtitle button -- if you avoided The Wire during its initial run or on HBO's On Demand service, you get one very helpful bonus. When watching an episode on DVD, you can call up the English subtitles displaying the dialogue when one of the characters mumbles their line or uses slang you can't parse out. On almost every episode, there's usually at least one line that remains a puzzle no matter how many times you rewind (I'm not up on Baltimore street slang) and that button sure comes in handy. The thug Snoop is an especially indelible character,

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but she has a low growl of a voice that is darn near indecipherable.

**3. Watch it with a friend** -- Complex shows like *The Wire* are a lot more fun to watch with someone else. Especially when a show isn't airing on TV with millions of viewers tuning in, you can feel a little isolated. And frankly, *The Wire* is a wonderfully multilayered show where minor characters can pop up just a few times one season and then show up two seasons later. It's always nice to have someone to turn to and say, "Who is that again?"

**4. Watch one or two episodes a night** -- Some people like to go on binges and watch six or eight episodes or an entire 12 episode season on a weekend. That's disastrous for a sitcom and really not a good idea for a drama. Yes, it's good to watch an entire season over a week to ten days, but too many episodes at once can dull the fun. Plus, taking your time (if watching two episodes a night can be called taking your time) lets the weight of what's happening sink in.

**5. Don't give up** -- It takes about half of season one before the characters start to really kick in and you figure out who is who and what's going on. By the end of season one, you're completely hooked, but it does take a while. This shouldn't be as much of a problem since watching the episodes clustered together rather than over a period of three months makes it a LOT easier to follow the tangled plot.

**6. Enjoy!** -- You can look forward to unforgettable characters like McNulty (a lovable screw-up of a cop), Bubbs (a street person hooked on drugs), Prop Joe (a giant bear of a drug dealer), Kimma (the lesbian cop who just wants to be one of the boys), Lester Freamon (the smartest cop around and a man who could cut crime in half if anyone were intelligent enough to give him free rein), Omar (the scariest gay street thug -- actually just the scariest thug, period) and many many more including a group of students in season four who will absolutely break your heart.

So if it's not *The Wire*, what TV show is on your to-do list? *Upstairs Downstairs*? *The West Wing*? *Star Trek: The Next Generation*? *The X-Files*? Tell me.

Also out this week:

**South Park Complete Eleventh Season** (\$49.99; Paramount) -- It's a day for superlatives, but believe me when I say that *South Park* is not simply the best animated show on TV (sorry, *Simpsons*), but it's the best sitcom on TV. Period. *The Office*? *30 Rock*? *Flight of the Conchords*? *Entourage*? Not even close to the incredibly high standards maintained in the 14 episodes contained here. Throw in the wicked social commentary, endearing (yes, ENDEARING) characters like Butters and the most hilariously closeted character in TV history (I mean you, Cartman) and a series that began as sort of a goof, with really only the shock value of tykes cursing in the early years has gotten better and better and better. Start watching in season seven or eight and be amazed. Or start right here, with episodes about the "n" word, gay reparative therapy, the three-part adventure to Imaginationland, the homeless, giant bowel movements (hey, I didn't say they got wildly sophisticated), a Guitar Hero parody and a not-so-heartwarming Easter special. If you want an Emmys scandal, I say it's the fact that *South Park* has never been nominated for Best Comedy.

**Brand Upon The Brain!** (\$39.95; Criterion) -- Guy Maddin is truly one of the most singular talents working in film today. He's obsessed with silent movie techniques but no retro-fanatic. In fact his films are ground-breakingly modern and inventive that don't so much push against genre conventions as expand them with polymorphous pleasure. This silent, black and white sci-fi nightmare set in a lighthouse during his childhood (see?) is a wonderful companion piece to Maddin's current theatrical mood piece *My Winnipeg*. He is like absolutely no one else and how many filmmakers can you say that about? Also out is a two-movie collection of *Larisa Shepitko* -- *Eclipse Series 11* containing *Wings* and *The Ascent* (\$29.95; Eclipse), a celebration of a Russian director I'm perfectly clueless about. But how can you resist a 1966 movie about a female fighter pilot reliving her glory days during WW II but now a headmistress at a school?

**Documentaries** -- Among the flood of movies and documentaries about surfing, *Bra Boys* (\$29.99; Berkela) stands out with its story of the Abberton brothers, four lads tangled up in murder and heroin and violence and poverty who only feel free on the waves. Narrated by Russell Crowe and sure to be a fictional film any day now. *Muhammad Ali: Made In Miami* (\$19.99; PBS), a fine 60 minute documentary that finds a new angle on Ali by focusing on Miami where he fought Sonny Liston, met the Beatles, befriended Malcolm X and refused to fight in Vietnam. *Jane*

"Washington Unplugged"

Arianna was on CBS' "Washington..."

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I'm a little embarrassed to love this show as much as...

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ATLANTA — Traces of a chemical used in rocket fuel were found in samples of...

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It's great to love the city you live in, and better to

*Goodall's When Animals Talk* (\$14.95; Animal Planet) is a rather banal collection of stories about communicating with animals. But then, I don't even have a pet. And *Poisoned By Polonium* (\$29.95; Kino) is a convincing expose of Putin's Kremlin as wildly anti-democratic and authoritarian, which won't be a shock to the people of Georgia.

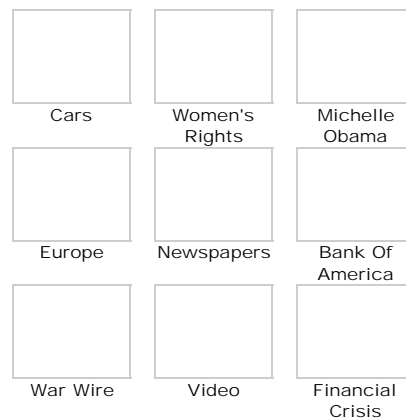
**Kids** -- *Strawberry Shortcake Rockaberry Roll* (\$14.98; Fox) is the latest in an endless series of kid-oriented titles that celebrate pop music (a bit odd, since the music industry is all but dead). The only clever twist is the name of her band: Strawberry Jam. (And if they covered the Grateful Dead or even Phish I could die happy.) *Superheroes: The Filmmation Adventures* (\$24.98; Warner Bros.) is an 18 episode collection featuring The Flash, Aquaman, The Atom, Hawkman, Teen Titans, the Justice League of America and others in various combinations fighting evil. These sort of pairings are a lot easier to swallow in animation than they would be in a live action movie, which is why the live action Justice League movie is such a bad idea. *Tom and Jerry Tales Volume Five* (\$14.98; Warner Bros.) is 12 episodes of Tom trying and inevitably failing to outwit Jerry.

**TV Roundup** -- *The American Mall* (\$24.99; Paramount) is MTV's so-so attempt to catch up with the Disney Channel when it comes to music-oriented programming...and how weird does that sound? The literate Adam Dalgliesh of Scotland Yard is seen in 9 TV mysteries in the *PD James Essential Collection* (\$149.98; Koch). *Dave's World Season One* (\$44.99; Paramount) is the sort of routine, amiable but forgettable sitcom that TV relies on. *Caroline In The City Season One* (\$44.99; Paramount) on the other hand was a would-be sophisticated comedy starring the capable Lea Thompson and theatrical star Malcolm Gets that bounced around for four years with modest success. *The Glittering Prizes* (\$39.98; BBC) is the UK miniseries about Cambridge students that helped make Tom Conti a star. *Martin Lawrence 1st Amendment Stand-Up Season Two* (\$29.97; Anchor Bay) offers 12 episodes from the Starz channel comedy showcase featuring Rodman, Donnell Rawlings and Sheryl Underwood among others. *The Racing Game* (\$39.99; Acorn) is a six episode miniseries based on the Dick Francis mystery set in the horsing world and isn't it a mystery that there's never been a really good movie based on one of his many bestsellers? *The Anton Chekhov Collection* (\$59.98; BBC) contains nine Chekhov plays performed on the BBC. And Chekhov is so hard to get right (really, he's almost always better to read than see performed), that despite casts that include everyone from the great Gambon to Eileen Atkins, there are many more misses than hits here. Excellent extras include three radio plays and Ewan McGregor reading a clutch of Chekhov short stories.

**Movies Roundup** -- *The Art of War II: Betrayal* (\$24.96; Sony) isn't the best Wesley Snipes vehicle but he could use the money and you know you always wanted to simply not pay your taxes too so help him out. *The Killing Of John Lennon* (\$19.95; IFC) is the other John Lennon movie, this one starring Jonas Ball as the disturbed Mark David Chapman. Some people should not read *The Catcher In The Rye*. *The Outlaw and His Wife* (\$29.95; Kino) is the 1918 silent classic by Swedish master Victor Sjöström. It's paired with a documentary on him and there's also another DVD with two more of his movies (*A Man There Was* and *Ingeborg Holm*) but this is the place to start. *Belly 2: Millionaire Boyz Club* (\$26.98; Lionsgate) is a weak sequel starring The Game to the gangsta flick *Belly* that glorified pimping and dealing but was at least energetically directed by Hype Williams. It's a testament to how crushed with movies the multiplexes are that so many films can fall through the cracks -- even an "indie" film like *Smart People* (\$29.99; Miramax), which can boast of Sarah Jessica Parker, Dennis Quaid, Ellen Page of *Juno* and Thomas Haden Church can simply disappear as if it were never released. God help the indie film that *doesn't* have big name stars. *The Legend of the Shadowless Sword* (\$19.98; New Line) is Korea's not-as-successful answer to the masterpiece *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* but it does have two strikingly lovely female leads and a nifty underwater fight scene. And kudos to New Line for making a digital copy of the film available to purchasers who might want to watch the film on another device; every studio should do this. Marianne Faithfull continues her singular career by playing a frumpy housewife turned sex worker (and not just any sex worker but "the best right hand in London") in *Irina Palm* (\$27.99; Strand). Apparently, hand jobs can be empowering. *Joy House* (\$24.98; Koch) is a 1964 bit of crime fluff starring Alain Delon and a young Jane Fonda, both looking absurdly pretty. Who's prettier? It just depends on your taste; my bisexual friends call it a draw. I'm quite unfamiliar with Polish director Lech Majewski but Kino has released a batch of his major works, including the autoiographical opera of sorts *The Roe's Room*, the even more surreal *Glass Lips* and the perhaps marginally more mainstream romance *The Garden Of Earthly Delights* (\$29.95 each title; Kino), which is where I'm going to begin. Finally, even the packaging for grindhouse classic *Hollywood Chainsaw Hookers: 20th Anniversary Edition* (\$14.98; Retromedia) makes me laugh

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thanks to the tagline "They charge an arm and a leg" and a quote from Maxim magazine calling it "The 4th greatest B-movie of all time," because really, even calling it "the 3rd greatest" wouldn't be nearly as funny.

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It only took me two episodes back in Season 1 to get hooked on The Wire. I watched every episode that followed, and waited impatiently between seasons for the next story to start. I would watch each episode several times a week, always finding things I hadn't seen or understood in the previous viewing -- it was (and is) that densely textured. When it ended after Season 5, I went through withdrawal; I was simply unwilling to let these characters go.

So now, with the release of the Season 5 DVD, I am just so jealous of all the people who will buy or rent it for their first viewing. And for those of you who've yet to see a single episode, you simply have no idea what's in store. I am jealous of you Wire virgins most of all.

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I was waiting for Season 5 of The Wire to come out on DVD ... so now going to start at Season 1 and work my way through the whole series. I'm also looking forward to catching up on South Park ... I'm a bit behind ... but that's what Netflix is for! Thanks for the DVD information as always!

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 **ChristopherLib** [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of ChristopherLib](#) [permalink](#)

I discovered the Wire at about this time last year. Since then I've been totally absorbed by the greatest achievement in the history of television. Anyone looking for a great complex adult drama must buy every single season.

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Or netflix them or borrow them from a friend! But do watch it. Thanks for reading ChristopherLib.

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