

DVDs: Inside Llewyn Davis, Anchorman 2 and Hank Williams

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Disney Animation's biggest hit ever, a look at folk music that improves with repeated viewing, Joseph Gordon-Levitt's most important role and two intriguing music releases are all out this week. Here we go.

FROZEN (\$ BluRay combo; Disney)

SAVING MR. BANKS (\$ BluRay combo; Disney) -- The Disney Animation division -- as opposed to Pixar -- had been stumbling for many years and was almost closed. That all turned around with the creative and solid commercial success of Tangled. And now the revival is complete with Frozen, already the highest-grossing non-Pixar animated film in history and in a few weeks it might own the crown outright. How did that happen? I'm not sure. But every element of Frozen is pretty good: the story is pretty good, the songs are pretty good, the animation is pretty good, the comic relief is pretty good and it all added up to a solid, entertaining movie. Wait, I forgot one element: the voice work. Here is the strongest suit of Frozen: Idina Menzel is satisfying as the cursed sister with the arctic touch, Josh Gad is dorkily amusing as a snowman brought to life (a scenario I was cringing over in advance but worked well), Santino Fontana is very good as Hans during the fumbling meet-cute with a princess (though even he can't quite convince on the big switcheroo), Jonathan Groff has great leading man poise and comic timing as Kristoff and Kristen Bell above all shines as Anna. Bell's performance is a delight. Their work is what gives this very familiar tale with a few abrupt twists heart and charm. When it comes to mixed messages, it's hard to top Menzel's Elsa strutting towards the camera looking like a supermodel while proclaiming she's going to accept and own her imperfections! And "Let It Go" -- is it just me or do the lyrics sound like a manifesto for a sociopath? "No right, no wrong, no rules for me/ I'm free... You'll never see me cry" and so on. Um, it's okay to show emotions and actually right and wrong are pretty important concepts. I kid! The message is clearly intended to be one of empowerment and not placing limits on yourself to fit in and so on. And it clearly clicked. This is far from the greatest Disney animated film (personally, I even like Tangled more), but it's a welcome return to box office form nonetheless.

I doubt it, but maybe someday we'll see a movie about the making of Frozen, what it meant to Kristen Bell's career (hopefully, giving Veronica far more interesting opportunities), watching the husband and wife songwriting team develop "Let It Go" in Prospect Park in Brooklyn, seeing the emotional lift it gave to an entire company and so on. Hey, it could happen. They might even have to manufacture some drama, which is exactly the problem with Saving Mr. Banks. Half the movie is an amusing and relatively accurate look at Walt Disney (Tom Hanks) wooing P.L. Travers (Emma Thompson) to convince her to sign over the rights to Mary Poppins. Much of the film shows her giving prickly feedback to the script and the songs (by the great Sherman Brothers) and even sketches for the look of the sets and costumes. It's all based on audio recordings made at the time where Travers does indeed come across as a disapproving schoolmarm. It's a modest story but Thompson is always so appealing -- and so very good as a grump -- that it's fun...until they spoil it with a maudlin and inaccurate finale where Travers is moved to tears during the premiere of the film. (In fact, she disliked it and wanted plenty of changes.) Worse, huge chunks of the movie involve heart-tugging flashbacks to her childhood where a drunken father (played well by Colin Farrell) sinks into the mire. These are shot in the pretty, classic Disney family film style of the 1970s, a bizarre contrast to the sad story they're trying to tell. Cut all that out and you'd have a perfectly pleasant if misleading movie that for a while does a pretty good job of showing the early stages

of a classic's development. And for what it's worth, I love children's books but the Poppins series is not a favorite at all. The first book is the best and the rest increasingly scattered and ineffective; the movie -- and Julie Andrews -- improved on it immensely.

INSIDE LLEWYN DAVIS (\$35.99 BluRay; Sony)

AMERICAN HUSTLE (\$40.99 BluRay combo; Sony) -- Like many films that stand the test of time, Inside Llewyn Davis bears repeated viewing. I liked it immediately when seeing the film in theaters (though I hated the look of the opening scene and took a while to get into it), I liked the soundtrack and I liked a lot of the performances. Oscar Isaac is great as a struggling folk singer who has good taste in songs, but is terrible and managing his own career and lacks "it," that special something that lets you connect with an audience. When his friends (played by Justin Timberlake, Carey Mulligan and Stark Sands) take to the stage for an impromptu version of "500 Miles" and the entire audience in the coffeehouse starts singing along, Davis looks around with a befuddled look on his face. He had just performed a song (and quite well); it got polite applause. But the warmth from the crowd, the spontaneous joining in -- how does that happen, what did they do, what did I not do? It's all right there in that one moment. But the final death knell for Davis will be the arrival of Bob Dylan, who changed all the rules permanently. The movie charts a meandering period as the realization that he's just not going to make it in the business dawns upon Davis, a hard moment for anyone who pursues a creative life. One scene -- with F. Murray Abraham -- is particularly devastating. In general, Davis is pleasingly contradictory. He is absolutely talented and worth listening to but his life is overshadowed in part by the suicide of his former singing partner. Davis may never recover artistically from that loss and certainly feels the pain personally. He's a mess with women (though not cruel), he's difficult with the hangers-on who give him a place to crash but expect him to literally sing for his supper, hell he can't even keep track of a damn cat. The movie is great-looking and the soundtrack holds up. More interestingly, I've had more stimulating discussions of this movie than anything else this year: Is Davis the real talent and his friends (a faux Peter, Paul & Mary in the making) the sell-outs? Or the other way around? Is John Goodman great or coasting on his blustery big-man persona? Does Davis give up or face reality? Did Dylan take folk music to a new level or crush it under his feet on the way to pop success? It's somewhat disappointing that this release didn't include the concert film that has been put out separately, but it has an informative making-of and looks and sounds great.

In contrast, I find American Hustle almost embarrassing. David O. Russell's early work was distinctive and fresh. Three Kings is a terrific war film, both universal and telling in its details. But he's hit new peaks of commercial and critical success just as his films become less interesting and original. The Fighter didn't convince. Silver Linings Playbook I actually sort of liked against my better judgment. But American Hustle - inspired by the ABSCAM scandal of the 1970s -- is an utter flop. Its aping of Martin Scorsese is so overt and relentless, I was almost embarrassed for it and Russell. The constant battering with pop songs (you can only push buttons so many times), the structure, the storytelling gimmicks...on and on it went. The movie felt more like a grad student's final project than a feature film by a director seven features into his career. Truly, the actors are not at fault. Indeed, somehow I think they were all good to very good despite a script and direction that kept the film overall from being anything more than an exercise in imitation. When you watch it again on BluRay or a year or two from now, you're going to feel hustled by this exercise in style.

MYSTERIOUS SKIN (\$29.99 BluRay; Strand Releasing)

THE HIDDEN FORTRESS (\$39.95 BluRay combo; Criterion) -- Mysterious Skin is one of the best films of the 2000s. This BluRay presents the film in excellent condition and with some key extras demonstrating how important this film was to everyone involved. It's a career peak for director Gregg Araki and the best adaptation of Scott Heim's best novel. But above all it helped Joseph Gordon-Levitt rise from his TV sitcom roots to be taken seriously as an actor and set him on the path towards the eclectic and increasingly promising career he's on today. The story is a disturbing tale of two young men linked by...something. One of them is convinced he was abducted by aliens and that's why there are gaps in his memory. The other (JGL) is a hustler and knows all

too well they were molested by the coach of their baseball team. It's evocative, funny, sexy, scary and a genuine independent film. Don't miss it.

Another masterpiece gets a fresh new presentation from Criterion. Akira Kurosawa's *The Hidden Fortress* can be sold to kids as partial inspiration for *Star Wars*. (If you need proof, there's a brief interview with George Lucas in the extras.) In truth, of course, it's a rousing adventure tale with some hilarious comic relief and one of the master's pure entertainments. Toshiro Mifune is a general trying to shepherd a princess, two bumbling assistants and a hoard of treasure through enemy territory and you won't catch your breath for more than two hours. This BluRay/DVD combo set isn't just an excuse for repackaging: the film looks tremendous. Despite revivals and earlier editions, it's pretty amazing to think this is the best *The Hidden Fortress* has ever looked, certainly in the home. Another essential from Criterion. Enjoy!

MONSTERS: THE COMPLETE SERIES (\$99.98 DVD: Entertainment One)

ATLANTIS SEASON ONE (\$39.98 BluRay; BBC Home Entertainment) -- I wish I was a bigger fan of horror and other offbeat anthology shows. Even when major series fall through the cracks, weird shows that most of us have never heard of get presented with loving care on DVD. Enter *Monsters*, the show from the same folks behind *Tales From The Darkside*. Launched in 1988, they made 72 episodes and gave work to everyone from Steve Buscemi and Linda Blair to Adrienne Barbeau and Deborah Harry. And Tempestt Bledsoe. And Meat Loaf! And Tom Noonan! And Gina Gershon! And Jerry Stiller! And Pam Grier...and Chris Noth...and Rob Morrow...and Tony Shalhoub. Yes, as the list of guest stars goes on, you realize there's a lot of interesting talent that had fun dashing off a 45 minute episode of *Monsters*. This was a surprisingly strong genre in the 1980s, what with this and *TFDS* and *Tales From the Crypt* and *Friday The 13th* TV series and surely some others I'm forgetting. I'm not informed enough to distinguish this from the others (though it seems to have a tad more sci-fi elements on tap than most), but it looks good and apparently all the original music is intact. No extras to speak of, but if you're like me, when the show is a favorite that's not nearly as important as getting to see the episodes exactly how they were originally presented.

Just like *Monsters* is from the people behind *Tales From The Darkside*, *Atlantis* is from the people behind *Merlin*. That series was a prequel of sorts to the Arthurian legend. *Atlantis*, on the other hand, is a bizarre mishmash of a series, with heroes tossed in from Greek myth or history, the setting of *Atlantis* adding nothing to the proceedings and a time traveling Jason (Jack Donnelly) who is stranded back in time (or in an alternate universe) but never references this fact again and is soon a dashing swordsman and hero. Blessed comic relief is provided by Mark Addy as a washed-up Hercules. It makes literally no sense in the least -- not the setting, not the jumble of figures, not much of anything -- but if you miss *Xena* and *Hercules* and *Merlin*, this will do I'll suppose.

ANCHORMAN 2: THE LEGEND CONTINUES (\$39.99 BluRay combo; Paramount)

THE BOOK THIEF (\$39.99 BluRay; Fox) -- *Anchorman 2* managed the tricky feat of being promoted to the hilt and yet coming so long after the original that expectations were still somehow muted. It was fine, for fans who really wanted a little more *Anchorman*. But the air of being wholly unnecessary never quite left the project. It's a pity more thought wasn't put into the film instead of the cleverly relentless promotional campaign in which the actors were seemingly everywhere and doing everything to bring attention to the film. The final clever touch was to re-release the film into theaters in the newly cut R version they had prepared for the DVD and tout the fact that it now has 763 new jokes! Genius, but the genius starts and stops there and it's purely of the Barnum sort. Mind you, it worked. The sequel nearly doubled the worldwide box office of the original.

The Book Thief has literally nothing in common with *Anchorman 2*. In fact, it may be the polar opposite. One is a comedy and the other is a drama. One is the sequel to an original comedy. The other is based on a best-selling young adult novel set during World War II when a family is hiding a Jew in their cellar from the Nazis. One was a hit. The other was a flop. One had low expectations. The other -- with the pedigree of its talent and the acclaim

for the novel -- was touted as the sort of film that had Oscar written all over it. One can learn lessons from Anchorman 2, lessons in marketing at least. It's hard to think of any lessons to learn from *The Book Thief*, which was nobly made with the best intentions and for whatever reason fell far short.

SAMSON AND DELILAH (\$24.99 BluRay; Paramount) -- At least once a decade from the 1920s to the 1950s, director Cecil B. DeMille made a Biblical epic. Spectacle! Pageantry! Skin! (Not too much, but enough.) Oh it was always nonsense, but Victor Mature and Hedy Lamarr make two of the stiffest leads imaginable in this over-ripe silliness. All the people complaining about the Biblical accuracy of Noah should really be more worried about a good movie. You can reach more people with an entertaining tale and still get the Word across. Case in point -- Biblical epics like these that add lots of inaccurate fluff but boy do they bring in the people. This BluRay edition looks great, by the way. You can almost forget the dreadful acting.

THE DUKES OF SEPTEMBER (\$24.98 BluRay; 429 Records)

YOU ARE THERE (\$19.99 DVD; Shanachie) -- Two offbeat music releases round out this column. The Dukes Of September is a super group comprised of Donald Fagen, Michael McDonald and Boz Scaggs. They've been touring around for years, delivering their hits and some choice covers with impeccable elan. One of their concerts was turned into a 90 minute concert for PBS that has proved very popular during pledge drive. It's finally come out on BluRay. Unfortunately this is just the 90 minute special seen on PBS and not a longer cut featuring an entire concert or featuring extras with them commenting on each other's career. Still, it's an amiable night with some excellent musicianship.

You Are There is a genuine curio. There is no information, but it's a collection of live performances from some country legends captured on 35mm in color (mostly) back in the very early 1950s. The setting is clearly a TV series of some sort, a country variety show set in a barn where performers would take turns performing, punctuated by square dances, comic numbers and a sing-along at the end of each show. I've no idea what show it might or when it aired, but you can see some of these acts returned on more than one occasion (they're wearing different outfits, for example). This 52 minute disc contains 24 musical numbers and four hoe-downs. The picture and sound quality is variable but it's mostly pretty good, albeit the colors are a tad muted at times. It begins with the legendary Bill Monroe, a legend of bluegrass, performing "Close By" with his band. You'll find five other Monroe performances, two by the Louvin Brothers and assorted others as well, most of whom I've never heard of at all. I do recognize Grandpa Jones and his bushy mustache but Stringbean was new to me. (His gimmick is to emphasize his height by wearing pants so low down they could teach homeboys a thing or two.) There's also Lonzo and Oscar (who offer comic relief along with their numbers) and a few others that more informed might know, along with very brief appearances by Kitty Wells and Faron Young in sing-alongs. The final treasure is four very rough, black and white performances by Hank Williams. The picture quality is more variable here but it's great fun to see him live in person. His gloomy persona looms large so it's a surprise to see him looking amiable and duded up in flashy sequined suits. "Cold Cold Heart" drags a bit but his intro is hilariously corn-pone and a duet with Anita Carter is intriguing. For diehard fans of classic country music, these rare glimpses of legends (and a lot of others) will hold some interest.

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Note: Michael Giltz is provided with free copies of DVDs and Blu-rays with the understanding that he would be considering them for review. Generally, he does not guarantee to review and he receives far more titles than he