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Michael Giltz

Freelance writer and raconteur
Posted: November 3, 2010 05:33 PM

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DVDs: Johnny Carson Outshines His Boxed Set

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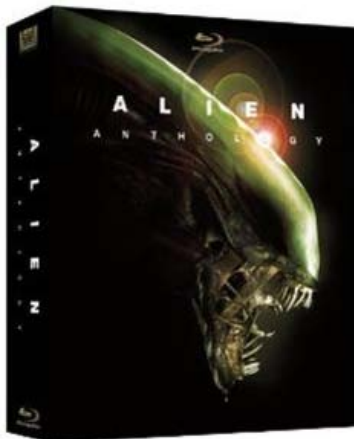
TONIGHT -- 4 DECADES OF THE TONIGHT SHOW STARRING JOHNNY CARSON (\$119.99;

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Respond 2 Entertainment) -- Okay, first the content. Johnny Carson is a legend but I still didn't expect as a kid that I would want to watch reruns of talk shows decades later. But put on Dick Cavett and you sink into fascinating, informed conversation. Put on Carson and you get a master of the quick quip, gentle but smart interviewing and a remarkable ease whatever the situation. This set contains half hour chunks from a total of 56 episodes ranging from a New Year's Eve show on December 31, 1965 featuring Woody Allen, skits from the Muppets and a live report from Times Square at midnight for the ball drop through a 1990 show that includes ventriloquist Jeff Dunham and BB King. Each segment begins with portions of Carson's monologue and then segues into the segments, which range from skits to banter with the band to guests and performances. No, it's not complete episodes but it does get closer to the feel of one. They do a good job of not repeating all the classic bits included on earlier highlight reel boxed sets. And of course rights issues and simple space had them choose to edit episodes rather than put the entire 48 minutes (or 60 minutes once it expanded) on, warts and all. So yes, it's fun to watch and sink into these moments. Now onto the bad news. The image quality is ok, though the better your TV the more distracting the shaky video might be at brief moments. But really, it's adequate. The sound is quite muffled and low, which could be a problem for older fans; crank that volume up high but don't forget to lower it before switching back to regular TV. Finally, the packaging and extras are subpar throughout. The set looks nice, of course, but it's quite bulky. I much prefer sets that will fit onto a shelf alongside other DVDs. More and more sets -- even if they're bulky -- keep this in mind and include pull out volumes that can go on a shelf. Not this one, which has a fold-out, wallet sort of packaging that sits inside the box but can't be pulled out and used individually since there's no identifying info on the sides of them. The booklet that comes with the set is both bland and useless. With 56 segments containing multiple guests, you'd think they'd tell you which episode is on which disc at least somewhere. But no such luck. You have to count down to the episode you want and figure out which disc it's on that way. (They come four to a disc.) That's just lazy, since there's plenty of room in the booklet for breaking up each four episodes with a headline that says Disc One and so on. You should also do it on the individual volumes, but no such luck. The final complaint is really unforgivable: no chapter breaks. That's right. You can access each half hour segment, but if you want to skip to, say Frank Sinatra performing or Steve Martin or Bette Midler, tough luck. You have to fast forward to find each section. That's really absurd in this day and age and for a set like this where you're undoubtedly going to want to share favorite moments with friends. The quality of Carson is never in doubt. But the various boxed sets done of the treasure trove he left behind continue to frustrate and let fans down.



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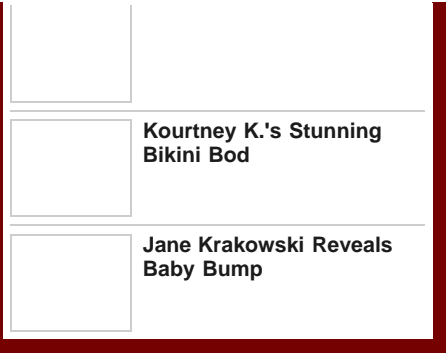
Queen's Royal Wedding
Rift

BACK TO THE FUTURE 25TH ANNIVERSARY TRILOGY (\$79.98 BluRay or \$49.98 regular; Universal)

ALIEN ANTHOLOGY ON BLURAY (\$139.99; FOX) -- Two wildly anticipated boxed sets are just out and they both have a lot in common. Both have a sci-fi angle, though *BTTF* is more of a warm comedy that uses a time-travel twist to shed new light on kids, parents, high school life and so on. The *Alien* series of course is much more disturbing and action-oriented. Both movies have problematic sequels. Most *BTTF* fans loved the first movie, liked the third and were confused by the "darker" second one. Most *Alien* fans love the first and second one but consider the third and fourth so-so at best. Now even their boxed sets have much in common. On both, the movies look spectacular in BluRay and on regular DVD. (The first two *Alien* movies in particular are eye-popping.) Both will overwhelm you with loads of extras, some new to these sets even though they've been extensively covered in the past and you'd think there was nothing new to say. Both sets also have very unfortunate packaging. The *Alien* set comes in a gorgeous hardcover book that squeezes in quite tightly into its box (you have to wiggle it out). Then the movies themselves are foolishly presented in sleeves: you have to sort of modestly bend the thick cardboard-ish page and then slide the DVDs out, trying not to scratch them as you do. Very unfriendly. The *BTTF* set features a weird sort of plastic tab thing I've never noticed before that kind of holds the DVDs in place and makes it tricky to get them out til you figure out the trick. Even then it's sort of awkward. Don't the people who design these sets ever actually try to remove and put back the DVDs to see how it works? That said, casual fans might want to wait for individual releases of their favorite movies in these series, especially if you really only want the first film. Surely they'll come out eventually on BluRay. But fanatics -- even those who owned earlier boxed sets of these films -- won't mind upgrading. These movies have never looked better.



WINTER'S BONE (\$27.98; Lionsgate) -- One of the best movies of the year, *Winter's Bone* has proven a rare, word of mouth hit. That's surely going to continue on DVD if and when lead Jennifer Lawrence gets a well-deserved Oscar nomination. She plays 17 year old Ree, a young woman barely holding her family together. Their meth cooking dad skips bail, which means the cops are about to kick Ree, her feeble mom and her other siblings out of their ramshackle home. She plunges into the backwoods territory of the Ozark mountains to find out where her dad is -- assuming he's still alive. Writer-director Debra Granik creates a growing sense of unease and danger. Ree goes from home to home -- deeper towards the center of the mystery about her daddy -- asking about him. Each new step she takes feels like one step deeper into violence and fear. It's both real and riveting as she tangles with vicious criminals and drug dealers, not to mention the code of silence that keeps these poor as dirt people cut off from the law and the rest of society. Music is used beautifully throughout but the only thing Ree can finally take solace in is her own sense of right and wrong.



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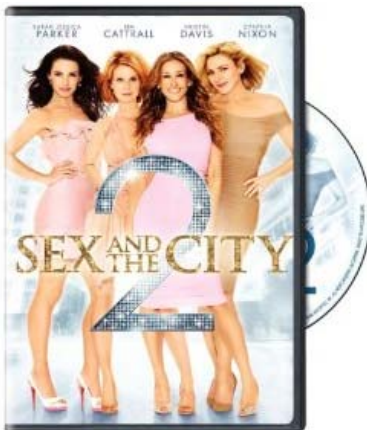


Sarah Palin

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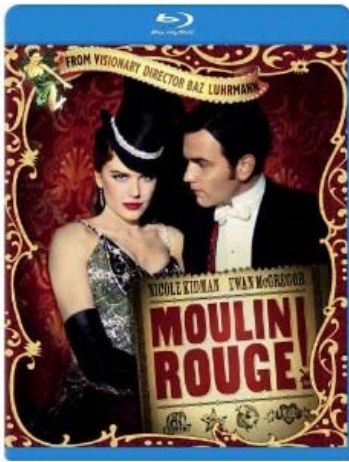
SLINGS & ARROWS THE COMPLETE COLLECTION (\$79.99 BluRay; Acorn) -- If you liked the Tony-winning musical *The Drowsy Chaperone*, people behind that co-created and wrote this. If you liked *Kids In The Hall*, the brilliant sketch show, Mark McKinney is also a co-creator and writer. If you liked the sweet fish out of water cop comedy *Due South*, Paul Gross stars in this. If you like Sarah Polley and Rachel McAdams, they're here too. Get my drift? It's a nutty tale of a low-rent Canadian theatrical company haunted by the ghost of its former artistic director and led by Paul Gross in an utterly daffy manner. Season One, they put on Hamlet. Season Two they put on Macbeth. Season Three they put on King Lear. You don't need to love Shakespeare blah blah blah -- oh, don't worry. It's funny. This is really one of those gems a la *The Office* and *Arrested Development*. Quite offbeat but deliciously good. Dive in.



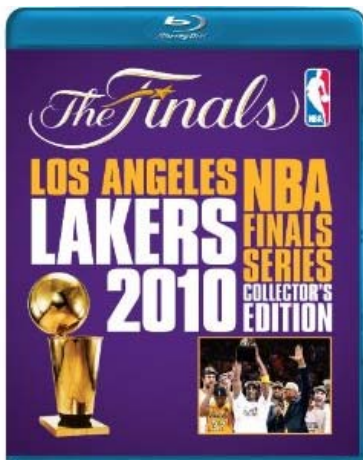
SEX AND THE CITY 2 (\$35.99 BluRay and \$28.98 regular; Warner Bros.) -- Frankly, the idea of these empowered, smart, savvy women jetting off to Abu Dhabi for a fun vacation turned me off at the start. That's like going to apartheid-era Sun City in South Africa. That bit of cluelessness aside, everyone agrees that this wasn't as good as the first film and god knows the first film wasn't that good to begin with. The highlight comes at the start when Mario Cantone's character gets married and Liza Minnelli is the one who marries them. Now that's a gay wedding! Plus she sings. They're not complete idiots. The Eighties flashback was also a cute idea, one of very few here. However, it did make money (\$288 million, quite a bit less than the original's \$416 mil, but still) so maybe they'll take another shot at it and try and capture the spirit and intelligence of the TV show once and for all.

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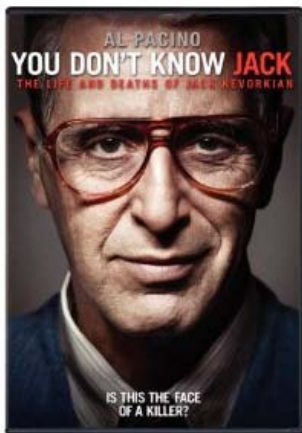
MOULIN ROUGE/ ROMEO + JULIET (\$34.99 each; FOX) -- I have issues with both of these Baz Luhrmann films. But intellectually I appreciate what he's doing and Luhrmann is nothing if not visually striking. That's shown off to great effect on these BluRays, which unfortunately do NOT contain all the extras found on earlier standard DVD editions. The leads give themselves over completely to Luhrmann's vision which is the only way these confections can work. In *Romeo*, you can fast forward to your favorite passages and in *Moulin Rouge* of course you can jump to your favorite musical numbers. Remember when people used to watch movies on VHS, where a third of the picture would be cropped off and you had to laboriously fastforward and rewind to watch something twice? Madness!



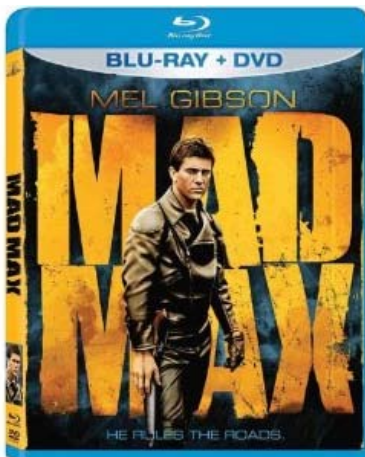
LOS ANGELES LAKERS 2010 NBA FINALS SERIES (\$89.98 BluRay and \$79.98 regular) -- It was one of the most watched NBA championships in a decade -- and one of the most exciting, thanks to that Game seven comeback -- so fans will savor getting to watch every game again on DVD. You get a modest pre-game overview with quotes from players and fans, stats for each quarter, the post-win boasting, the press conference interviews for each game and final trophy ceremony. That said, it's basically just the games and \$10 per game for something people could tape off their TV seems awfully high. They should have more bells and whistles AND a lower price so fans can jump on it as a fun keepsake.



POLDARK SERIES 2 (\$69.99; Acorn) -- The *Poldark* series was such a massive success when it first aired around the world in the 1970s that I'm sure the BBC and PBS were sorry they rushed through the first seven books in the Winston Graham series of novels. Masterpiece Theatre has that aura of highbrow entertainment. But the dirty little secret is that this is a bodice-ripping page-turners of a TV series, filled with intrigue and romance and danger and betrayal and all the sort of thing one finds in a soap. But well-acted and with a British accent. Great fun.

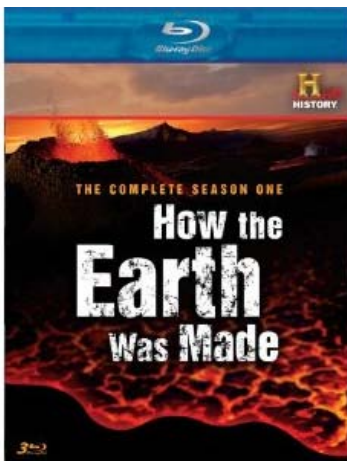
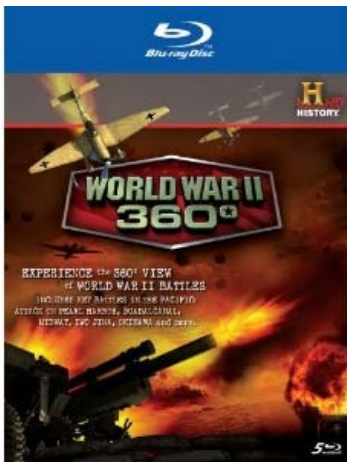
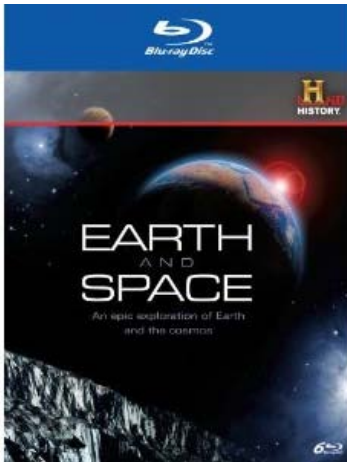


YOU DON'T KNOW JACK (\$26.98; HBO) -- Slightly overshadowed by the Emmy sweep of HBO's other high quality TV movie *Temple Grandin*, this looks at the assisted suicide/mercy killing or depending on your perspective just plain killing of Dr. Jack Kevorkian. Al Pacino won the Emmy for Best Actor and both he and director Barry Levinson are in fine form. If you can't get to New York to see Pacino on Broadway in *The Merchant Of Venice*, why not check out one of his most acclaimed performances in years?



MAD MAX (\$24.99 on BluRay; MGM) -- Okay, I'd always dismissed the original *Mad Max* movie. Compared to the brilliant sequel *The Road Warrior* (one of the great action films of all time), *Mad Max* was sort of cheap with a brutal rape setting things off and it was just somehow inferior. Little did I know

that my first experience of the film was a poorly dubbed US version. I still prefer *The Road Warrior* but I no longer wonder how one B movie led to the classic. Now *Mad Max* is on BluRay with a second regular DVD recreating the special edition version. The image looks even better of course, though they haven't seemingly remastered the film. You can spot a lot more detail but I suppose we'll have to wait till the next two movies come out and they do a boxed set with the whole series for a definitive version. That is years away, so for this modest price it's a pretty good bargain to have both regular and BluRay available for a movie that's much better than I originally thought.

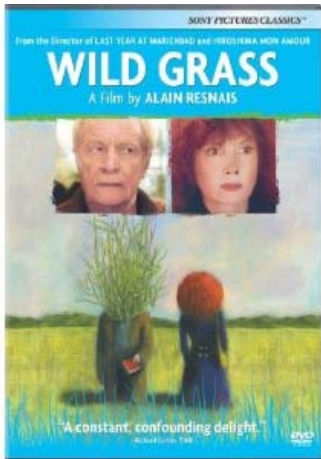


EARTH AND SPACE (\$79.95 BluRay; A&E)

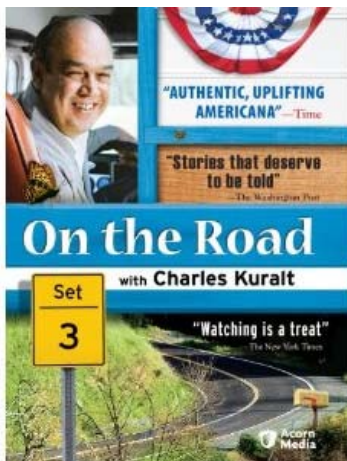
WORLD WAR II 360 (\$79.95 BluRay; A&E)

HOW THE EARTH WAS MADE (\$49.95 BluRay; A&E) -- The first two sets are sort of a weird repackaging, rebranding effort. *Earth and Space* looks like some entirely new production but in fact it contains the complete first seasons of both *The Universe* and *How The Earth Was Made*. *The Universe* has produced five seasons so far and *How The Earth Was Made* has produced two (to date). There's a certain logic here. They're both science-based shows made for a wide audience. But why would anyone want just season one of both of them? And why rebrand them like this when they're available already? Still, both are good looking and solid in the current basic science they offer up. *World War II 360* does a

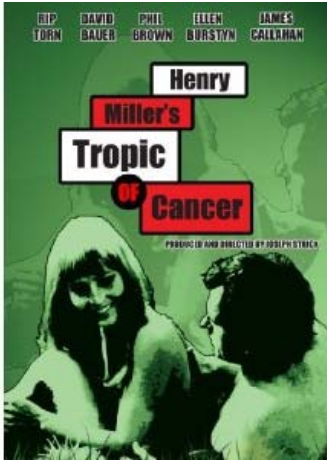
similar thing: it offers up both *Battle 360* and *Patton 360*, two multi-episode shows that look at different aspects of World War II (not the entire conflict as such). *Battle 360* follows the USS Enterprise, which took part in every major sea battle in the Pacific campaign. *Patton 360* of course follows the famous (infamous?) general across Africa and into Italy and across the rest of Europe. The 360 degree hook isn't really much more than a gimmick, but the shows are fine for war buffs. And in this case, it's collecting two complete shows (only one season for each, naturally, given the subject matter) so it makes a lot more sense as a boxed set.



WILD GRASS (\$28.95; Sony Pictures Classics) -- Director Alain Resnais has delivered one of the most perplexing films of the year. One hour into this film, I defy anyone to describe it accurately and know where it's headed. Is it a light, witty romantic comedy; a searching drama; a nihilistic fable and/or a satire of any or all of these? It begins with playful narration describing a woman who is buying shoes only to have her purse stolen. That purse is discovered by a mature gentleman who hesitates, picks it up and takes it to the police. Very small moments can lead to momentous changes, we are told (again and again and again). The man becomes mildly obsessed with the woman. Then the woman becomes obsessed with the man. Then they both turn on each other (though never at the same time). The wife of the man is of course at least 30 years younger and stunningly beautiful and yet still doesn't blink an eye when his mistress comes over for a chat. This is a French film after all. And constantly the mood is changing. A playful moment is followed by a harshly real moment of emotion and pain which is followed by something entirely else. And it all ends on a completely discontinuous, seemingly unrelated and very brief moment that left everyone I saw it with shaking their heads in confusion. I think Resnais is saying the tiniest incident can change your world. That may not be an accurate reading but it's the only one I can think of and is the only way to put this fitfully amusing but confused trifle to rest.



ON THE ROAD WITH CHARLES KURALT SET 3 (\$39.99; Acorn) -- From late night talk shows to news reports from Kuralt, it's kind of amazing to me how entertaining and even fascinating TV from the past can be. Surely Kuralt crafted his news stories with care, but to think they'd hold up so well today probably didn't occur to him or most of the people who fill up the hours of television with their work. Yes, comedies and dramas can endure, but who expected the day to day stuff to still intrigue? Of course, Kuralt isn't just anyone. He's an Emmy winning reporter who tracked down the offbeat and the everyday and delivered their stories with skill and avuncular charm. You get everything from stories of teachers and singing mailmen to trips to Ellis Island and "the last lighthouse" and a guy who lives on a glacier. Plus, it's priced inexpensively. Good stuff.



TROPIC OF CANCER/SUMMER AND SMOKE (\$24.95 each; Olive Films/Paramount) -- Two more notable releases from the indie label Olive Films. I'm not a big Henry Miller fan but he was never better served than when Rip Torn plunged into the autobiographical story of Miller boozing and bedding his way through Paris. Frank for its time, someone might want to remake *Tropic Of Cancer* again in a more explicit fashion, though they'd be lucky to find anyone as perfect for Miller as Torn. Ellen Burstyn is also a standout in a small role. Tennessee Williams is often censored and softened when brought to the screen, so many of his classics are ripe for remake as well. (*Cat on A Hot Tin Roof*, anyone?) But *Summer and Smoke* was less envelope-pushing and thus got through relatively unscathed in this Oscar-nominated film. Geraldine Page and Laurence Harvey (usually a stiff, to me) are wonderful in the leads and Rita Moreno pops in as well. Elmer Bernstein's score is another plus. As with the previous Olive releases, the image quality is good and there are no extras. If Paramount is going to ignore substantial films like these, thank goodness they're letting others pick up the slack.

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 him in any way to speak positively or negatively of their titles.

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