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DVDs: Law & Order's Record-Breaking Boxed Set

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LAW & ORDER: THE COMPLETE SERIES (\$699.00; Universal) -- As far as I can tell, *Law & Order: The Complete Series* is the biggest boxed set in history with the most hour of programming devoted to a single series. No wonder: the show ran for 20 seasons. *Gunsmoke* could match it, since that too ran for 20 seasons. *60 Minutes* has been in primetime for more than 40 years; Oprah could match it with her daytime talk show; *The Ed Sullivan Show* ran for decades too; *Doctor Who* is going strong and some children's shows, soap operas and animated series and other programs around the world have gone on and on. But in the US at least, when it comes to sitcoms and dramas in primetime, *L&O* has the biggest boxed set in history. The *Simpsons* has more episodes (it's the longest running sitcom and animated series in history), but since they're half hour shows, Dick Wolf's *L&O* still has it beat for a long time to come in the number of hours it has.

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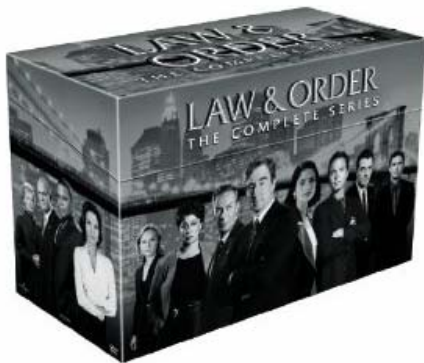


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So all in all this is a very impressive boxed set. Much of it is done well. It contains 20 seasons but the set is slim enough to fit on my shelf alongside other DVDs. Still, if you prefer you can remove the individual seasons and place them on the shelf instead. Happily, the DVDs are in standard cases, not those horrible cardboard sleeves that can make them hard to get out and very scratched. They also contain the crossover episodes with Homicide. On the downside, Season 14 is presented in a cropped, full screen version used for syndication; that's not acceptable in a set this lavish and expensive. And where's the Chris Noth TV movie *Exiled* from 1998? Still, you'll spend weeks watching it before you even realize those items are missing. That's how long it'll take to plow through this comfort food for people who love procedurals.

So here's a question: is *Law & Order* the greatest franchise in US TV history? Here are some other contenders:

Star Trek -- six TV shows (including the animated one), massively popular feature films and (as with all these franchises) there is more to come. If you ignore the books and merchandise and movies and focus just on TV, this is a mighty impressive series.

The Simpsons -- Again, this is a monster when it comes to merchandising; it and *Star Trek* probably far outstrip *L&O* once you add in movie and toy sales. But focusing strictly on TV and even including *Futurama*, which isn't really a spin-off as such, this will have to settle for legendary classic rather than the title of biggest franchise of all time...unless that Krusty spin-off gets a move on.

All In The Family -- For pure TV dominance, *All In The Family* was a remarkable franchise. Spin-offs and spin-off of spin-offs that still took place in the Bunker universe include *Maude*, *The Jeffersons*, *Good Times*, *Archie Bunker's Place*, *Gloria*, *Checking In*, and *704 Hauser* (even the house got its own show). Of course, it's a remake of a British series, so maybe they deserve the credit. Which brings us too....

American Idol -- A spin-off from the UK series *Pop Idol* (which bizarrely floundered, letting Simon Cowell launch *The X Factor* and steal their thunder). Nonetheless, *American Idol* was itself a monster success, passing *All In The Family* by being the #1 show in the country for six years in a row (it's gonna do it again this season too). It has been duplicated all over the world to massive success. Chalk up another one for the Brits. But hey, this isn't a sitcom or drama. Still, it was worth a mention. Which brings us to *L&O*.

Law & Order -- It has launched four direct spin-offs, including the current hit *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* (12 seasons and counting), *Law & Order: Criminal Intent* (ten seasons) and the less successful *Law & Order: Trial By Jury* and *Law & Order: LA*. *Homicide: Life On The Streets* is another direct spin-off from the show. It ran for seven seasons, featured major characters from the earlier show and included crossover episodes making it explicit that these shows took place in the same fictional world. *New York Undercover* and *In Plain Sight* are more of a stretch but can make their arguments. Putting those two aside, that's still a tremendous amount of television springing from this one series. No wonder they almost launched a cable channel devoted entirely to *L&O*.

Which leads us to the boxed set of the future: it could contain all five series (once *SVU* calls it a day). Of course, it won't be complete because some other *L&O* series will already be on the air or in the works. So a number of shows can compete for the title of biggest franchise of all time. But for now, this is the boxed set to beat.

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

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Note: Michael Giltz was provided with a free copy of the boxed set with the understanding that he would be reviewing it.

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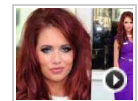
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