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 **Michael Giltz**
 Freelance writer and raconteur
 Posted: July 31, 2009 06:30 PM

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DVDs -- *Life On Mars* and Those Clever Brits

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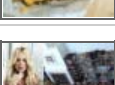



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I can't help romanticizing the British TV industry. We often see only the best of the best of British telly so it seems remarkably high in quality. Plus, the way their industry developed, many shows only have to produce six or eight episodes at a time, take a break and then -- if they want -- create six more. Take *The Office* -- one of the best sitcoms of all time, full stop. Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant did six episodes, took a long holiday, did six more, called it a day and then did

two one hour specials and then really finished for good. That wouldn't even get them three-quarters of the way through one season of *How I Met Your Mother* and it took them more than three years to do it! If there's one key to HBO's success, it's their imitation of British TV: they often do only 12 episodes a season, rather than 22 or more for the major networks and they don't insist on a tight schedule for their top talent. (Hence the long breaks between seasons of the *The Sopranos*.)

Life On Mars is one more terrific example of how the Brits do TV so well, especially drama. (The US rules when it comes to sitcoms, creating an extraordinary amount of high quality sitcoms at a feverish pace, *Fawlty Towers* and *The Office* and *Blackadder* and *The Royle Family* notwithstanding.)

Life On Mars Series 1 (\$59.99; Acorn) is dead clever, with the high concept set-up of a modern day detective somehow transported back (is he dreaming? did he step into a TARDIS?) to the early '70s where he must solve crimes and work his way back home. Hilarious culture clashes ensue. It's a smart idea executed wonderfully, thanks to a central performance by John Simm (the very fun miniseries *State Of Play*) as detective Sam Tyler. I laughed out loud when a US network said they would do a remake for primetime. Didn't they realize how dumb that was? An idea like that couldn't be strung out for 22 episodes, much less 5 years. How asinine. And in fact, the US version came and went immediately, with virtually every critic sending you to the original UK version out now on DVD.

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Rosemary Port, Outed

But the Brits aren't that resistant to success and the marketplace. Did you notice this set is called Series 1? Even though the entire story resolves itself nicely at the finale, they foolishly tried to do it again with Series 2 (an even dumber idea once you see how they ended it the first time). And THEN they tried to do a spin-off by having a female character from the show get "sent back" to 1981 (rather than 1973) in *Ashes To Ashes* and they dragged THAT out for two seasons as well. So watch Series 1 of *Life On Mars* and stop there and you can praise the Brits to high heaven just like I do.

One series the Brits extended successfully is *Wire In The Blood Sixth Season* (\$59.98; E1). Robson Green has a career-making role playing a brilliant but damaged (naturally) clinical psychologist who works with detectives in a fictional UK town to solve gruesome murders. This season contains four 86 minute movies, each one a complete mystery, ranging from the timely (the death of a Kurdish woman) to the Agatha Christie worthy (a string of murders in which each killer then becomes a victim. Bloody good fun.

ALSO OUT ON DVD:

BILL PLYMPTON'S DOG DAYS (\$24.95; Microcinema) -- I first woke up to this iconoclastic animator's work with the 1992 full-length film *The Tune*. You might be forgiven for thinking this new compilation is a greatest hits, since it's chock-full of winners like the Oscar-nominated short *Guard Dog* and the other two shorts in the Dog Trilogy, *Guide Dog* and *Hot Dog*. He's a uniquely twisted man, as the 2008 short *Santa, The Fascist Years* quickly makes clear, but it's Plympton's gorgeous, hypnotic lines and shimmering backdrops that keep you glued again and again. You can visit him (and buy these DVDs at his website www.plymptoons.com and they're also at Amazon. Also just out is his second live action film, 1995's *Guns On The Clackamas*, a dreaded mockumentary, in this case a goofy one about people making a Western while cast members die left and right, the sort of problem that might stop lesser talents but not these Ed Wood-like folk. Works best with an audience in the right mood (like, at midnight). Disney once reportedly tried to lure Plympton into working with them. Maybe the folks at Pixar will have the right sensibility to give him free rein. Certainly, his devilishly funny shorts deserve as wide an audience as possible.

300 THE COMPLETE EXPERIENCE (\$39.99; Warner Bros.) -- There are awesome BluRay releases and then there is *300: The Complete Experience*, which immediately ranks with *T2* as an ideal demo disc when you want to show off your system to friends. Loads of new extras let you bone up on the making of the film and the real history that (modestly) supports the bloodfest. Who were the Spartans? Who cares? Just let this nifty blend of animation and live action (it is, to its cartoonish credit, wholly original in its look) blow out your speakers. Buff warriors dying by the dozens never looked so impressive.

CORALINE (\$34.98 or \$39.98 for BluRay with DVD and digital download; Universal) -- Henry Selick's film -- along with Pixar's *Up* -- have together turned 3-D from a gimmick into a genuinely artistic tool for movies. They both use the 3-D so gracefully and with such subtlety that it takes your breath away. Unfortunately, the 3-D experience in a movie theater still can't be easily captured at home with cheap cardboard glasses. Happily, it also can be watched in 2-D and though the film was conceived with 3-D in mind, it works beautifully in 2-D as well. Based on the marvelous novel by Neil Gaiman, the movie doesn't quite capture that book's classic charm, but is very, very good on its own creepy turns. A young girl ignored by her hard-working parents crawls through a mysterious hole and finds an alternate world where her parents pay almost TOO much attention to her. One of the best films of the year, even though once you read the book you'll discover that it is even better.

FILLMORE: THE LAST DAYS (\$19.98; Rhino) -- This is not the complete theatrical film *Fillmore*, but is drawn from the same shows and includes some of the name acts. That movie pales in comparison to *Woodstock* and *Monterey Pop* and others, but it's enjoyable, highlighted by a Boz Scaggs sets, which unfortunately is NOT included here. The Santana set here also rarely focuses on Carlos Santana, oddly enough, the Jefferson Airplane segment is more of a music video and so on. I spent most of my time trying to spot my friend Linda in the audience. (She was there!) to no avail. Some pretty good stuff, especially for fans of the Grateful Dead, but not a patch on the so-so movie. Sometimes, if you can't get all the music rights, it's better to release nothing at all.

ROBOT CHICKEN STAR WARS EPISODE II (\$19.98; Turner) -- Seth Green and Matthew Senreich relax after their first *Star Wars* spoof was warmly received by everyone from haters of *Star Wars* to Lucas himself and go all-out for this second edition. The DVD version is 15 minutes longer than the aired version and also has 90 minutes of bonus features, though Andy Richter and Breckin Meyer are plenty for me already. most anyone can enjoy but fans will rightly watch it a gazillion times. (It's certainly more fun than watching *Phantom Menace* twice.)



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MADE IN U.S.A. and 2 OR 3 THINGS I KNOW ABOUT HER (\$29.98 each; Criterion) -- I'm no fan of Godard, but at least in these films from 1966 and 1967, when he was growing increasingly disdainful of audiences and actually "entertaining" them (how middle-class of us to want to be entertained), Godard couldn't help but deliver visually stunning movies. Both movies -- one a slap-dash deconstruction of detective films, the other a meditation on consumerist society (which isn't nearly as fun as it sounds) -- look sensational and Criterion does them proud. Extras include archival interviews, audio commentary, visual essays about the films and their political context and very welcome new subtitles.

THE MIDDLE MAN: THE COMPLETE SERIES (\$39.99; Shout) -- I don't want to go overboard and claim greatness for what is essentially a pleasing diversion, but *The Middle Man* was a very pleasant surprise. I completely missed this lark of a show when it aired on ABC Family in the summer of 2008 and I'm sorry I did. Based on graphic novels, it's a sci-fi buff's delight, telling the droll story of an agent hired by unseen forces to combat alien incursions with the help of a new sidekick and would-be artist. Matt Keeslar is a square-jawed goody two-shoes who speaks in old school politeness ("Good golly!") and Natalie Morales could be Tina Fey's little sister as she paints by day and battles aliens at night. The geeky sci-fi references come fast and furious, the tone is light-hearted and silly perfect for teen kids and their parents and after an episode or two the show really jells in finding its tone and sticking to it. Goofy fun and both actors deserve more starring roles down the road

ECHELON CONSPIRACY (\$29.98 or \$39.99 on BluRay; Paramount) -- The hardest part of building a career is picking the right parts. Shane West has all the elements of a star (damn handsome, quite talented and -- as proven on TV's *Once and Again*, the acting chops to deliver) but he's had a hard time finding the right movies to bring him a wider audience. Naturally, actors don't get to pick and choose any role they want. But when someone talented like West keeps betting on the wrong movies again and again, it's a good sign they or their managers doesn't have the knack of picking winning roles that are god for him. *A Walk To Remember* was a good first step after *Once* folded and *ER* for several years was a smart move as well. But *The League Of Extraordinary Gentlemen* was a bomb (and looked like it from the get-go) and the anonymous indie flicks and horror movies are piling up: *The Lodger*, *The Elder Son* and this forgettable paranoid action flick all came and went. Even his good picks aren't getting the attention they deserve, like his turn as punk star Darby Crash in *What We Do Is Secret* and spooky horror/war movie *The Red Sands*. Hopefully one of his many upcoming projects will click and get West on firmer ground but movies like *Echelon* certainly won't do it for him.


COMIC LEGENDS COLLECTION (\$19.98; MPI) -- A curio for nostalgia buffs and hardcore fans of these famed performers, this collection is a grab-bag of material. Dick Van Dyke's disc is the longest (100 minutes) and highlights his early work on Pat Boone's variety show, along with a panel show he hosted. The rest are one hour, with trailblazer Phyllis Diller offering up some choice clips, Tim Conway's pre-Carol Burnett shtick as bumbler Dag Hereford, and a final disc featuring half an hour of Groucho Marx chatting with an audience and half an hour of Redd Foxx doing his blue material just before he exploded to wider fame on *Sanford & Son*. Glimmers of greatness here and there, but really just for the fan who wants everything. Their best work can be found elsewhere.

JEFF BUCKLEY: GRACE AROUND THE WORLD (\$34.98; Legacy) -- I keep thinking the well must have run dry on Jeff Buckley's posthumous work and then they release something else and darned if it isn't interesting. This new CD/DVD set contains a CD of live performances, one DVD of rare footage from the likes of MTV Japan (his signature tune, "Hallelujah"), the BBC and German television and the other with an hour long passionate documentary about Buckley that includes interviews with all his bandmates, family, friends and artists influenced by him. It's just for fans...but if you listen to it, you'll be one, so I guess that means it is for everyone.

MONK SEASON SEVEN (\$59.98; Universal) -- A bit long in the tooth, it's a relief to hear this long-running comedy is calling it a day after one more season. Tony Shalhoub has somehow avoided turning *Monk* into a complete caricature of his tic-ridden self, but there are only so many funny ways to wash your hands. Guest stars help, such as Steve Zahn as *Monk's* older brother. And apologies to Traylor Howard but I still miss Bitty Schram. (And yea! She'll guest on an episode in the eighth and final season.

FAERIE TALE THEATRE: TALES FROM HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN (\$14.98; E1) -- Shelley Duvall's delightful *Faerie Tale Theatre* is available in a nice complete boxed set. But if you're not ready to drop \$100 on it, this one DVD collection of four episodes is a good sampler, featuring Mick Jagger, Melissa Gilbert, Carrie Fisher and Art Carney in key roles. Also out: *Princess Tales* with Jennifer Beals, Liza Minnelli and others. You'll eventually want the whole thing, but you can always share these DVDs with friends.

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On the ball: with his new play *All That I Will Ever Be*, a post-Six Feet Under Alan Ball proves there's life after death. (THEATER): An article from: *The ...* (The national gay & lesbian newsmagazine) by Michael Giltz

A cabin of one's own: New England's MacDowell Colony celebrates 100 years of artistic utopia. And the gay and lesbian artists who prospered there celebrate ... (The national gay & lesbian newsmagazine) by Michael Giltz

THE LUCY SHOW SEASON ONE (\$39.98; Paramount) -- Lightning struck twice, for a change and no wonder: Lucille Ball starred alongside her friend Vivian Vance, they used many of the writers who worked on *I Love Lucy*, they even shot in black and white and Lucy insisted her ex-husband Desi Arnaz oversee the show (which he did for one season). A Top 10 hit for its entire six year run, peaking at #2 when it left the air and was replaced by the sadder, more desperate *Here's Lucy*. Even on this show, the formula (widow and divorcee live together and raise their kids) soon ran thin. But at the start it was a marked improvement over the dregs of the final gasp of *I Love Lucy*. She even won two more Emmys at the end but if she ever deserved it, it was for this first batch of shows.

THE SIMPSONS COMPLETE TWELFTH SEASON (\$49.98; FOX) -- You know the show has been running a long time when Comic Book Guy gets on the cover (and even finds true love in "Worst Episode Ever"). You start to pick out the funny episodes, rather than the classic ones and calls for the show to pack it in gracefully would go blissfully unheeded by the talent. Oh well. A dream run of eight or nine seasons is a distant memory, so take pleasure where you can, such as with "A Tale Of Two Springfields" and "Simpsons Tall Tales."

CHARLIE'S ANGELS FOURTH SEASON (\$39.95; Sony) -- Only the Playmate of the Year or a new Bond girl could match the excitement of announcing a new Angel for Charlie. This season it was Shelly Hack joining Jacklyn Smith (the only one smart enough to stay around for the entire run). You know the jiggle is losing its bounce when they include a cross-over episode with the cast of *The Love Boat* (easily the least-sexiest cast on ABC). And Farrah Fawcett -- who probably realized she had made a mistake in leaving so quickly) comes back for a guest shot.

HOTEL FIRST SEASON (\$54.99; Paramount) -- Producer Aaron Spelling never missed a chance for selling his shows in any way possible and probably would have had every Angel check into *Hotel*, a rather anonymous anthology series anchored by James Brolin and Connie Sellecca. Hey, if Spelling had one brilliant gift, it was casting.

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[Isparrow](#) *I'm a Fan of Isparrow* 9 fans [permalink](#)

life on mars (american) was one of the most under rated of all t.v. shows. not since "cop rock" have i been so entertained. if they cut this show they may likely cut "house". they obviously can't tell well designed and conceived shows.

[Reply](#) [Favorite](#) [Flag as abusive](#) Posted 02:53 PM on 08/06/2009

[BlackJAC](#) *I'm a Fan of BlackJAC* 25 fans [permalink](#)

HBO really isn't following any "British model" in regards to season length. Thirteen episodes tends to be the standard minimum season order for any show, with cable ordering fewer episodes than the broadcast networks' 22 episodes probably because they have a smaller audience to begin with and very likely don't have the funding for more.

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[Aramingo](#) *I'm a Fan of Aramingo* 12 fans [permalink](#)

I liked the US LOM, and I got the Bowie reference (are you reading , rj?). And I agree with the majority that the ending sucked. The UK version surprised me in that Philip Glenister did such a good job with a role that Harvey Keitel (sp?) belted out of the park. I actually prefer Glenister.

I also liked Ashes to Ashes, basically because of Glenister. I was disappointed they only showed series one here in the US. It's a God-awful small affair....

[Reply](#) [Favorite](#) [Flag as abusive](#) Posted 12:06 PM on 08/05/2009

[BlackJAC](#) *I'm a Fan of BlackJAC* 25 fans [permalink](#)

Please; a glitched virtual reality fantasy is much more plausible for that scenario than a coma fantasy, especially when you factor in the brain damage a coma can cause.

[Reply](#) [Favorite](#) [Flag as abusive](#) Posted 01:47 PM on 08/05/2009

[Aramingo](#) *I'm a Fan of Aramingo* 12 fans [permalink](#)

On BBCAmerica LOM was followed by a show that feature time travel in a telephone booth. Plausible? I think, in some cases, plausibility can be sacrificed for compelling narrative.

[Reply](#) [Favorite](#) [Flag as abusive](#) Posted 07:51 PM on 08/06/2009

[thebirdstheword](#) *I'm a Fan of thebirdstheword* 6 fans [permalink](#)

'spaced' was a great british sitcom as well. edgar wright, simon pegg, jessica stevenson, nick frost, mark heap and julia deakin are all very talented. they spoof american pop culture so much that it doesn't feel too british. lots of great references.

it's not just britain that has the 6 show per season format. 'city of men', from the makers of the great brazilian film 'city of god' was a very good series - six or seven episodes per season, with a year in between series. you got to see the main characters grow up during the course of three seasons.

[Reply](#) [Favorite](#) [Flag as abusive](#) Posted 07:27 AM on 08/05/2009

[rainbowblue](#) *I'm a Fan of rainbowblue* 3 fans [permalink](#)

I'm sorry after Torchwood: Children of Earth, there is no hope for the Brits. Maybe it's the producer, or something, but that was just plain awful.

[Reply](#) [Favorite](#) [Flag as abusive](#) Posted 03:25 AM on 08/05/2009

[kathy001](#) *I'm a Fan of kathy001* 33 fans [permalink](#)

I loved Life on Mars #1 so much that I will definitely be buying the DVD but I completely agree that the 2nd series sucked. But I also liked the U.S. version of Life on Mars. I thought they did a pretty good job of it until the ending. The ending was so rotten it was just an embarrassment.

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[noaxe397](#) *I'm a Fan of noaxe397* 52 fans [permalink](#)

I was just glad they made SOME attempt at wrapping up the loose ends, unlike, say, Invasion a couple of years ago.

I kind of expected more from the American version of LOM, given the big name cast.

[Reply](#) [Favorite](#) [Flag as abusive](#) *Posted 03:45 AM on 08/05/2009*

[rjmiller](#) *I'm a Fan of rjmiller* 7 fans [permalink](#)

I immediately laughed when I heard "Life on Mars" was coming to US tv. First of all, no one will get the David Bowie title reference. Second, we've had a handful of time-travel cop shows in the last 15 years, and they've all fallen flat.

At least they never followed through on the planned Spaced remake.

[Reply](#) [Favorite](#) [Flag as abusive](#) *Posted 01:56 PM on 08/04/2009*

[WTEffington](#) *I'm a Fan of WTEffington* [permalink](#)

Check out the comedies IT Crowd (geek, workplace humor) and Coupling (sex comedy), which US producers tried to Americanize and failed.

Lost in Austen if you are a Pride and Prejudice fan, and which US producers are trying to Americanize.

[Reply](#) [Favorite](#) [Flag as abusive](#) *Posted 12:49 PM on 08/04/2009*

[BlackJAC](#) *I'm a Fan of BlackJAC* 25 fans [permalink](#)

And CLUELESS is EMMA set in Beverly Hills.

[Reply](#) [Favorite](#) [Flag as abusive](#) *Posted 01:55 PM on 08/05/2009*

[pab08](#) *I'm a Fan of pab08* 3 fans [permalink](#)

Another GREAT example is "Jekyll ."

Very, very good BBC show.

[Reply](#) [Favorite](#) [Flag as abusive](#) *Posted 12:30 PM on 08/04/2009*

[Former Lee Warmer](#) *I'm a Fan of Former Lee Warmer* [permalink](#)

As a Brit I'd agree that US TV is of a higher standard in terms of flagship dramas and comedies. One Brit-box hit to watch out for, if you get the chance, is "The Street" (created/written by Jimmy McGovern) which has featured a whole host of top-line British TV and film actors. It's a gritty drama that follows the lives of various residents of one street in Manchester. You get a different story every episode with few recurring characters and it has everything - heart, soul, humour. This drama is in a different class compared to 95% of other British TV series in the last 10 years.

[Reply](#) [Favorite](#) [Flag as abusive](#) *Posted 09:44 AM on 08/04/2009*

[kathy001](#) *I'm a Fan of kathy001* 33 fans [permalink](#)

It sounds great. I hope I get a chance to see it.

[Reply](#) [Favorite](#) [Flag as abusive](#) *Posted 02:15 PM on 08/04/2009*

[Michael Giltz](#) *I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz* 4 fans [permalink](#)

Hi Former,

Thanks for mentioning The Street. I saw almost all the episodes when it aired here in the US (on BBC America, I think) and it was indeed a very good, unique drama. It's out on DVD from Koch if anyone wants to check it out.

Michael

[Reply](#) [Favorite](#) [Flag as abusive](#) *Posted 09:27 PM on 08/04/2009*

[BlackJAC](#) *I'm a Fan of BlackJAC* 25 fans [permalink](#)

Probably because they don't have large writing staffs doing them or the equivalent of the Parents' Television Council threatening boycotts if it doesn't meet their standards.

[Reply](#) [Favorite](#) [Flag as abusive](#) *Posted 01:49 PM on 08/05/2009*

[LeBelAge](#) *I'm a Fan of LeBelAge* 8 fans [permalink](#)

Its funny but the Brits think Americans do television better. The Guardian writers are always bemoaning the fact that no British drama has reached the heights of The Wire.

Speaking as an ex-pat living in the UK most of what's on UK television isn't as good as the US. The US produces a higher volume of quality TV shows, both in drama and comedy. American television shows dominate the airwaves here in the UK. That's not to knock the Brits, there are wonderful examples like Spooks, Life on Mars, and Torchwood. Money wise, Americans have the advantage and can generate a lot more original and quality programming.

[Reply](#) [Favorite](#) [Flag as abusive](#) Posted 07:48 AM on 08/04/2009

 **Michael Giltz** *I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz* 4 fans [permalink](#)

I agree completely. Of course, if you include ALL American TV (including all the cable stuff), our level of quality probably isn't any better over-all. But the US regularly turns out top-notch sitcoms with aplomb. But artistically, there's a lot to be said for only having to produce 6 or 10 or so episodes, rather than 22 or so at a time. That's why in the US, HBO and the like are such leaders in quality with The Wire and Mad Men and so on. (or in the UK, The Street, mentioned above.) And that's why the Brits (and I) are gobsmacked when the US can produce 24 episodes of "24" or say 22 of "Frasier" and have them be such high quality.

[Reply](#) [Favorite](#) [Flag as abusive](#) Posted 09:32 PM on 08/04/2009

 **LeftRight** *I'm a Fan of LeftRight* 79 fans [permalink](#)

Hey, I LIKED Life on Mars American version, except for the finale, cause the way they ended it was HORRIBLE!

[Reply](#) [Favorite](#) [Flag as abusive](#) Posted 07:52 PM on 08/01/2009

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