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DVDs: *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.*

Posted November 28, 2007 | 04:15 PM (EST)

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The Man From U.N.C.L.E.: The Complete Series boxed set (\$249.99; Warner Bros.) is a pricey but otherwise exemplary presentation of an iconic TV series. (For now, it's only available at www.manfromuncledvd.com but will eventually be sold in stores.) Don't call this TV spy show a rip-off of James Bond. After all, Ian Fleming was briefly involved in creating it and even contributed the name of the main character, Napoleon Solo (played to the hilt by Robert Vaughn). You get all 105 episodes from the four season run, interviews with Vaughn and co-star David McCallum, home movies McCallum shot behind the scenes, interviews with more than a dozen other central players, set designs, gadgets, the original un-aired pilot and much more. **Anyone who grew up with the show** will be beside themselves with glee.

And what a bizarre journey the show took. It was an immediate smash hit that successfully jumped on the James Bond bandwagon, debuting on September 22, 1964, exactly three months before the third Bond film *Goldfinger* opened in the US. (And give *U.N.C.L.E.* some credit: *Goldfinger* was the Bond film that established the formula for Bond that we know today, so the show wasn't lagging behind.

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But despite its immediate impact (merchandising, fan frenzy, etc.) the show was beaten by *McHale's Navy* (which only ranked #29 itself) and was immediately moved. For one brief season it aired Friday at 10 p.m. and was ranked #13. Clearly, it was a hit among adults since kids were mostly asleep by then. But by

the third year, the show had dumbed itself down. Like *The Adventures of Superman* a decade earlier, *U.N.C.L.E.* soon decided it was a kiddie show and the plots grew more and more cartoonish. (Seeing *Get Smart* ranked at #12 in 1967 probably didn't help matters.) A spin-off - *The Girl From U.N.C.L.E.* -- made matters worse. By the final year, they had reverted to a more serious tone (relatively speaking of course - the show was still filled with gadgets and beautiful women who swooned whenever Vaughn looked their way). But it was too little, too late.

The admirable liner notes detail all of this without apology. Watching the show go off the rails with success and then right itself creatively is fascinating. And the show itself is great fun most of the way and intriguing for what it reveals: at the height of the Cold War, Americans gladly embraced a show in which the US and Russia (and other countries) banded together to fight evil-doers. Fans of

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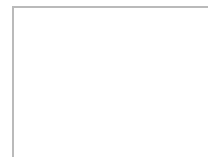
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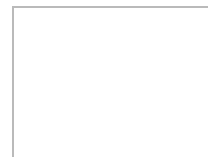
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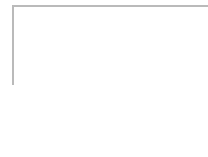
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So here's the thing. There's no shortage of articles dedicated to that certain je ne...



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the series will revel in most of the four seasons, with guest stars ranging from Joan Crawford to William Shatner and Leonard Nimoy appearing together a few years before *Star Trek*. (I would like to thank the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement, without whose assistance this review would not be possible.)

Also out this week: Toshiro Mifune begins his historic collaboration with Akira Kurosawa with *Drunken Angel* (\$39.95; Criterion); I got more hate mail than you can imagine for saying the TV show *Futurama* paled next to *The Simpsons* so I won't compare the two but just say that fans of the futuristic comedy will be thrilled that the first of four straight-to-DVD movies *Futurama: Bender's Big Score!* (\$29.99; Fox) is here and comes loaded with extras and not one of them involves me rating one series over the other; Andy Samberg proves he is worthy of primetime with his genial charm in *Hot Rod* (\$29.99; Paramount) even if the movie he does it in is a slight comedy, to say the least; Doris Day - the biggest movie star of her day, not to mention a huge recording artist and successful TV star - is long overdue for an honorary Oscar, but until then fans will have to settle for the fifth and final season of *The Doris Day Show* (\$39.98; MPI) with new commentary tracks by Day on select episodes and her final TV special *Doris Day Today* (\$19.98; MPI); *Paprika* (\$26.99; Sony), yet another genre-pushing animated delight from Satoshi Kon; Kal Penn is good on the TV show *House* but he's outshone in *The Namesake* by the excellent actors -- Irfan Khan and Tabu -- who play his parents; *Spice World* (\$14.94; Columbia), out just in time for their reunion concerts and *Bratz* (\$28.98; Lions Gate), which makes an ideal double bill for your next slumber party; the indefatigable *Land Before Time* series continues with the straight-to-dvd movie *The Wisdom of Friends* and the guest voices of Cuba Gooding Jr. and Sandra Oh; the understandably over-praised but still promising modest comedy *Waitress* (\$29.99; Fox) by the late actress and director Adrienne Shelly; three iconic ABC sitcoms all get their third season released on DVD, with *Happy Days* (\$38.99; Paramount) losing whatever remaining grip it had on reality, *Laverne & Shirley* (\$38.99; Paramount) cartoonish from the start and *Mork & Mindy* (\$38.99; Paramount) recovering somewhat from the show's bizarre decision to completely revamp a massive hit in its second season; *The Batman: The Complete Fourth Season* (\$19.98; Warner Bros.) introduces Robin even as it stays in the shadow of the terrific animated series from the Nineties; the child music prodigy heart-tugger *Vitus* (\$29.95; Sony) which would make a hankie-heavy double bill with the current flick *August Rush*; and finally, the pro wrestling Thunderdome match that is *Royal Rumble: The Complete Anthology* (\$59.95; WWE), which contains the complete first five Royal Rumbles and if you know what that is, you definitely want this set.

So tell me, we can all debate our favorite Bond film (down to your favorites of each Bond actor). But what's your favorite Bond-inspired movie, tv show or book? Dean Martin's jokey Matt Helm? *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.*? The young adult novels starring Alex Rider? I might just go with the Matt Damon *Bourne* movies. Not only is the trilogy very good in its own right but it pushed the real Bond series into getting back to a modicum of gritty reality. Thanks Jason Bourne!

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As a child I loved The Man From U.N.C.L.E., that and The Avengers. I couldn't stay up very late so I'm sure I missed many episodes. What a crush I had on Robert Vaughn!

By the way, any chance of The Days and Nights of Molly Dodd ever being released on dvd? I'd read something about copyright issues with the music featured in the episodes. How I loved that show, and the brilliant Blair Brown.

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I LOVED this show as a kid. Elia Kuriakin was so cute!! I'll wait till it hits the clearance table, though - \$249???? Wow.

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That's great about Man from U.N.C.L.E. but I am still waiting for 77 Sunset Strip to come out on DVD.

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i will always remember Vaughn as THE MAN FROM UNCLE. i watch THE MAGNIFICANT SEVEN when i can and BRIDGE OVER REMAGEN because of Vaughn.

the THEME FROM MAN FROM UNCLE was also pretty good. i was in high school back in those days and my friends would gather together and watch the series.

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Not a word about Thrush? An orgainzation half-way between SPECTRE and KAOS deserves at least a mention. Perhaps your pro-UNCLE bias has gotten in the way of fair reviewing.

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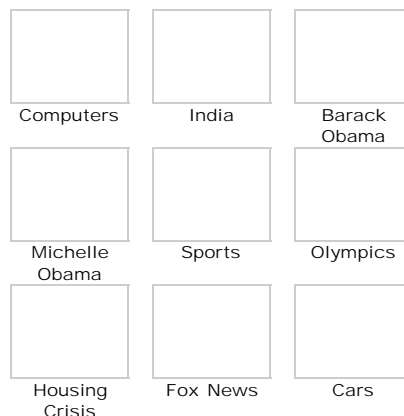
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It's the line-up of guests on TMFU that REALLY made the show! Former major stars, soon-to-be

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Hey, Michael: Thanks for another entertaining dispatch from DVDland.

I've got a question about how these DVD releases get done, and I'll use one of the shows you mentioned as an example.

"The Doris Day Show," as I recall from distant childhood, was a run-of-the-mill little sitcom that got by mostly on the charm of its star. It was never the most popular show on TV, nor was it ever declared an "artistic success" by critics. And it never, to my knowledge, went into syndication, to be rediscovered in reruns by future generations of video buffs.

The question is, Why would any profit-driven media company devote the time and resources necessary to methodically bring out all five seasons of the show in deluxe packages, complete with extras? Who's the audience for "The Doris Day Show" in 2008?

I could understand if it were "Sgt. Bilko" or "Car 54" or "The Odd Couple"--these were high-quality sitcoms loved by audiences and critics, and they ran for many years in reruns, thus building up a multi-generational audience that might be interested in the DVD.

But "The Doris Day Show"? All five seasons? I mean, it's not as though there's a big Doris Day revival sweeping the nation--she hasn't worked in years. What gives?

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I noticed the same thing about TMFU. I was only 16 and even I could see it turning into Batman. But I loved the first two seasons the best. I was living in Japan it's last season so I never saw it.

Nonetheless I loved it. Watched it religiously.

As for Kurosawa

DAMN!

I was first exposed to some of his films on PBS back in the early 70's when we got 7 stations and PBS(or whatever it was called back then.)

I first saw the original 7 Samurai which was all done in subtitles. I don't remember the other movie's name I do remember one of them was stunning. It had to do with an older Samurai who showed up at the "castle" of a Shogun and said he was masterless and penniless and asked to be able to commit suicide with honor at the castle. This took place during the period after the great Samurai wars and a great many Samurai had lost their masters and wandered the country looking for work.

When none could be found they would then ask to be able to commit ritual suicide at the castle. The Lord would then give them money to go away because it made it look like he could not help them if he let them do it.

BUT this particular Lord would let them and had them do it in front of all of his men. Most did it, some chickened out and were shamed.

Then came a young Samurai and the Lord decided to have him commit suicide, BUT the kicker was the young man had sold his swords and carried bamboo blades instead.

When the Lord found out he gleefully made the young man kill himself with the bamboo blades.

The older man was telling this story and it finally dawns upon the lord who is in front of him and you can guess the rest. GOD IT WAS GREAT. Beautifully done and...sorry I'm going a little crazy here.

Ikiru, Yojimbo and bunches of others.

Then I saw RAN and was bowled over.

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A great show. They were, I believed, the first show to have the "secret" entrances to headquarters. Anybody need their laundry done?

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