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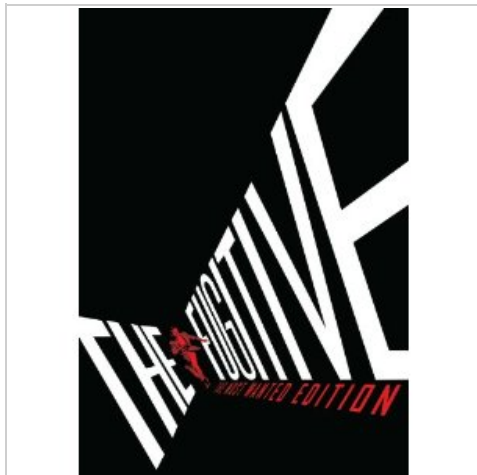
ENTERTAINMENT

DVDs: Not Crazy About *Mad Men*, The Very Cool *Peter Gunn*, Goofy *Carol Burnett* And More

Posted: 11/01/2012 12:00 am

What's going on? Why have even more TV shows been pouring onto DVD and BluRay lately? And not just full season offerings but elaborate boxed sets of entire runs of shows? A couple things. DVD sales are slowing but the one area of strength is TV shows; people may not bother to purchase every movie that comes out on DVD anymore, but they see a lot of value in buying an entire season of a show they like. So if that's where the money is, that's where studios will focus their energy. Plus, it's a lot easier to sell a digital download of a movie as opposed to 12 or 20 episodes of a show. So again, when it comes to TV, consumers like BluRay and DVDs. Finally, all the studios believe physical copies of movies and TV shows are a thing of the past. Paramount even handed off a chunk of its valuable library to Warner Bros. and said, we can't be bothered putting them out on DVD and BluRay. (They kept the digital rights.) In a few years, they imagine everyone will either access streaming video via Netflix, Hulu and the like or just buy a digital copy.

So for all these reasons it's a mad dash to cash in while the getting is good. So fans of classic TV get to dig into lavish sets devoted to *The Fugitive* and *The Carol Burnett Show* and *Poirot* and *Peter Gunn* and on and on. Here's hoping studios and music unions (one of the big roadblocks keeping certain shows off of DVD because of high royalty demands) wise up and cut deals so we can finally see shows like *The Wonder Years*, *I'll Fly Away*, *Hill Street Blues* and (fill in the name of your favorite TV show missing on DVD) come out on disc while they still can. Here's a rundown of some terrific sets that came out just in the last two or three weeks. It's impossible to put them in order of preference: many of these are gems we've been waiting a long time for.



THE FUGITIVE: THE MOST WANTED EDITION (\$259.98 DVD; Paramount) -- Here's a classic example of a TV show held off the market or released poorly in the past with substitute music cues. (That's why you don't see *The Wonder Years* or many variety shows on DVD much; the royalties for music become insanely prohibitive even though the result is that the shows aren't seen for years and no one makes any money. I'm all for a fair price but for too long music rights holders have been stubborn and short-sighted.) *The Fugitive* is an anthology show disguised as a drama. Like *Route 66*, the vagabond Richard

Kimble (David Janssen) would come into town, right a wrong or make friends and then head off into the night, with the determined Lt. Gerard hot on his heels. The music of

composer Dominic Frontiere was a key element in the show and it's almost all included here. (Apparently *something* is still missing -- maybe a song on a jukebox they couldn't clear? -- but most of the cues are original.) And they do right this time with a rare and welcome focus on Frontiere and his contributions to the show, down to a bonus CD soundtrack. The packaging is very attractive if you want to display it. Better still, the slipcase contains all four seasons in standard sized cases that will fit neatly on your shelf if you want to file them alongside all your other shows. It's a bit pricey (though it works out to just \$2 an episode, that's still a lot for such a vintage series), but the quality of the transfer throughout is top-notch. Loads of extras. This is how it's done.



MAD MEN SEASON FIVE (\$44.98 DVD; Lionsgate) -- Don Draper could teach Richard Kimble a thing or two about going on the lam and crafting a new identity. I've been waiting and waiting for people to come to their senses and realize the emperor has no clothes on this show to no avail. I've been deeply unhappy with the creative direction of this show from season two on and now I just "hate watch" it to yell in frustration when they undermine good characters with idiotic plot twists. Season Five was the worst by far and yet few others seem to care. Don is cursed with wives played by actresses who can't act. Peggy (the

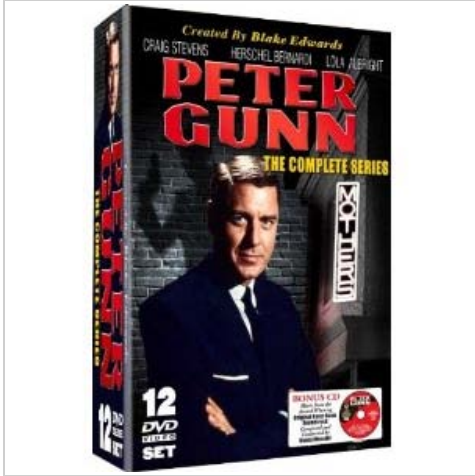
heart of the show) is shunted off to the side even though every time she's given a scene the show is immediately far more interesting. Joan Harris has resisted using her sex appeal to advance her career throughout her life and proven herself invaluable to the firm thanks to her smarts and know-how...only to trade sex for advantage. Really? After all these years? We pop into a minor character's travails over writing which haven't been referenced in *years* and are supposed to care? Really? And on and on and on. It's a very talented cast and the intelligence and craft is there. But the scripts are dreadful and getting worse.



ALL IN THE FAMILY COMPLETE SERIES (\$199.99 DVD; Shout Factory) -
 - This show can still take your breath away with its bluntness and truth-telling. I honestly don't know if it would be aired on network TV today. Yes, it pushed the envelope but not in vulgarity and crudeness as such, but in honesty about how people talked. It's genius was not to make Archie the butt of all jokes, an ignorant fool constantly shown up by the liberal Meat Head Michael. He often was this, very often. But Archie was a human being. Sometimes he actually won an argument or more accurately left Michael sputtering for a response even though

Michael knew (and we knew) Archie was wrong. Sure the show grew softer and Archie became more irascible and lovable than the sometimes ugly-minded bigot he began as. But that was seven or eight seasons in, or on the continuation of the show *Archie Bunker's Place* (which thank God is not included here). This is the complete nine seasons of the original series (surely three or four too many) and the first four or five are still potent stuff. You can see the show appreciating the impact it was having and starting to make "points" with its storylines, such as the attempted rape of Edith, all to the show's ultimate detriment. At its best, the main point of the series was to show a modern family dynamic in all its finger-pointing, name-calling, you drive me nuts but we're stuck with each other reality. It put a face on ignorance and bigotry not merely to disarm it or mock it but simply to see it for what it was; they didn't demonize Archie but they didn't downplay his

nastiness either. And it was hilariously funny to boot, especially early on. This nicely compact set has everything you'd want, including all 208 episodes solidly remastered, retrospectives, pilots for the direct spin-offs and more. It's a landmark series in every way.



PETER GUNN THE COMPLETE SERIES (\$99.99 DVD; Timeless) --

Another ground-breaking series, this is one I've heard about more than I've seen. It's great to finally get a chance to dive in. The pilot -- written and directed by show creator Blake Edwards -- has to be one of the all-time great pilots in TV history. In a tight, half hour, it sets up our cool private eye hero (Craig Stevens), the jazz club where he hangs out, the girl singer (Lola Albright) he dates AND creates and solves a mystery at the same time. It's intelligent, adult, sexy as all get out and noir to the hilt; as good as many a solid noir film. The picture and sound were

solid in the pilot. I dipped into episodes throughout the rest of the three seasons and they're not all as pristine -- there's a notable background hiss on some -- but it's quite watchable and this is the best we're going to get. I assume the solving of crime in the blink of an eye will get repetitive (and the girl apparently has a habit of always showing up during a shoot out) but it's fun fare and far superior to most of its era. The bonus is mainly a CD of that great score by Henry Mancini.

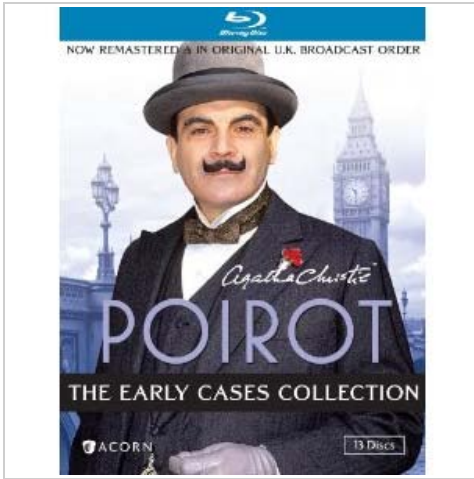


THE CAROL BURNETT SHOW ULTIMATE COLLECTION

(\$199.95 DVD; Time Life) -- I recently reviewed a six DVD set of Carol's Favorites that came out. But if you're really a fan of this variety show (which I grew up on Saturday nights), you're undoubtedly pleased that those music rights issues which kept the show truncated in syndication and off

the market in proper form for so long have been resolved. This mega-set contains 50 of the show's best episodes on 22 DVDs, along with commentary, reunion specials and the like. I'm not a fan of big bulky sets that can only sit on a coffee table or take up an entire shelf in your library. This one is especially awkward with a thick cardboard "curtain" you have to yank up to reveal the DVDs inside. Happily, they're all in standard sized cases you can line up on your shelf alongside other shows. The remastered episodes look great and it's a blast to realize how embedded even the dance numbers are in my memory. (I must admit the song and dance numbers often came at the end of each episode and I drifted off to sleep sometimes when I knew no more skits were coming; hey, I was a kid.) It's a pity wonderful talent like Bernadette Peters and Sammy Davis Jr. often lip-synced to prerecorded tracks but that doesn't take away from the appeal of their vocals. And the heart of the show is the intro by Carol and the skits, all of which you know well. It's startling to see again how dark the "Family" skits became. (It was more Edward Albee than Neil Simon by the end.) But skit after skit still appeals because they were such a warm ensemble and loved nothing more than to make each other laugh. I said it before and I'll say it again: it has the appeal of community theater where you watch old friends perform in shows and have a rooting interest in how they do. Of course here our "old friends" are talented TV stars we've never actually met. But did any other variety show ever feel so approachable and down to earth despite the major talent on display? Carol

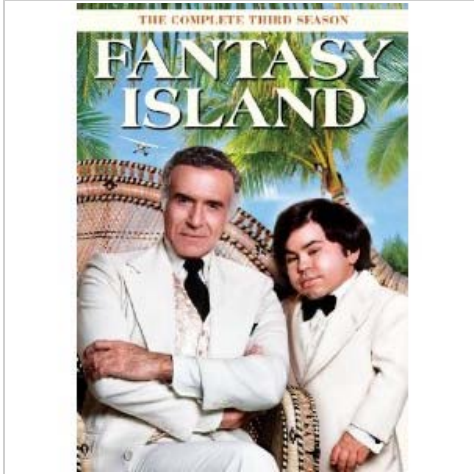
chose the episodes to include herself and she's a crowd-pleaser so it's probable most of your favorites are here. I know mine are. [Available direct from Time Life.](#)



POIROT: THE EARLY CASES COLLECTION (\$249.99 BluRay; Acorn)

-- We're approaching the grand finale of *Poirot*, one of the most ambitious and successful TV mystery shows in history. Star David Suchet has made Agatha Christie's prickly Hercule Poirot entirely his own. Despite a brief scare with cancellation, Suchet's desire to essentially film every single Poirot short story and novel is coming to fruition with the 13th and final series that is filming right now, including Poirot's final case from the novel *Curtain*. In the UK, series 1-12 have been sold as a boxed set. Here, since we know a final series is coming, Acorn has

opted for two complementary boxed sets. Here we have Series 1-6 with 45 mysteries in all, including hour long episodes and feature length adventures, all very smartly remastered and available in their original UK broadcast order and length. (Too often for American TV, we see snipped episodes of *Poirot* and *Foyle's War* and the like with minutes trimmed off to fit the time slot. Not here.) The chance to see them all in order and watch Suchet sharpen and refine his performance is one I'm relishing, especially since for some bizarre reason I missed the train when this all began and only saw the show in bits and pieces here and there. He'll surely rank with Jeremy Brett's Holmes as one of the great TV adaptations of all time. Find out how great starting here and now.



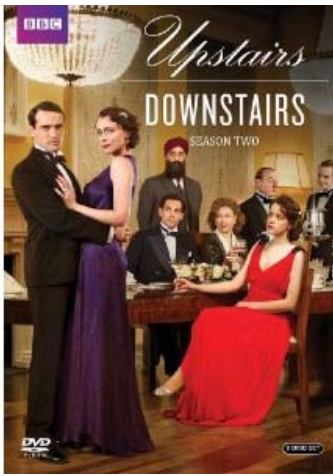
FANTASY ISLAND COMPLETE THIRD SEASON (\$39.97 DVD; Shout) -

- Not every TV series from the past is a gem. Most aren't. But few are as puzzling today as a show like *Fantasy Island*. Why oh why did we watch this anthology series? It began as a lame-brained show vaguely set in reality: people paid for the privilege of coming to Fantasy Island and getting some wish fulfillment that could be arranged for a price. But by the third season the show -- always bad -- became ludicrous as hints of Mr. Roarke's magical powers and godlike abilities became increasingly common and the fantasies left reality (I wanna be a cowboy!) to

absurd heights. An easy paycheck for faded stars, *Fantasy Island* did frequently have the benefit of guest stars better than the material. More often, everyone deserved each other.

UPSTAIRS DOWNSTAIRS SEASON TWO (\$34.98 DVD; BBC) --

It would have been hard enough for this drama to get out from under the shadow of the classic 1970s series it sprang from. (That show is one of the all-time greats.) But this edition had the extra stumbling block of *Downton Abbey*, a cheerful rip-off of the original *Upstairs Downstairs* that stole its thunder. They might have found their own voice with season two but disaster struck repeatedly. Jean Marsh (the star and co-creator of the original)



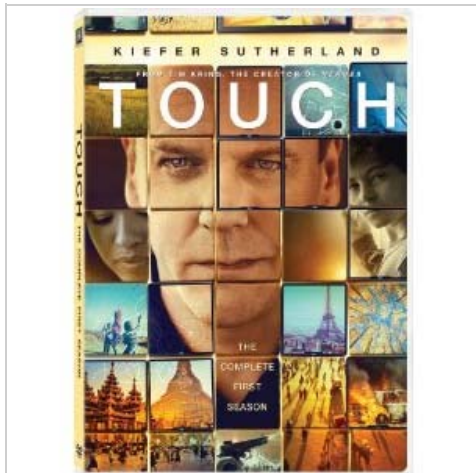
was the key link to the past and she suffered a stroke. Eileen Atkins (the other original creator) took a pass, unhappy

with where the new team led by Heidi Thomas was taking her character. The result is a truncated season that was cancelled and so couldn't even muster a proper farewell. Still, it's worth checking out the entire two seasons to see what might have been and imagine the reception for it if those tarts at *Downton Abbey* hadn't thrown themselves at the masses.



THE DUCHESS OF DUKE STREET (\$79.99 DVD; Acorn) -- The real spiritual heir to *Upstairs Downstairs* was this marvelous series by that show's mainstay producer John Hawkesworth. He created this drama based on the true story of a scullery maid who became the most famed chef in London and proprietor of a classy hotel, Cockney accent and all. It was the role of a lifetime for Gemma Jones who made the most of it. You get all 31 episodes in this compact edition. Anyone who is a fan of *Upstairs* or *Downton* should jump immediately.

TOUCH COMPLETE FIRST SEASON (\$49.98 DVD; Fox) -- If you're like me, you can be wary of committing to a new TV series. If that's what held you back on *Touch*, the new drama from the creator of *Heroes*, you can rest easy that season two begins in January on FOX. Kiefer Sutherland stars as the father of a little boy who has mysterious powers. Week to week, Sutherland gets involved in mysteries that connect disparate people in unexpected and life-changing ways a la *Babel* and other movies with cross-current plots that tie together nicely by the end. Sutherland is in fine form, tempering his Jack Bauer drive with more sensitivity and heart here.

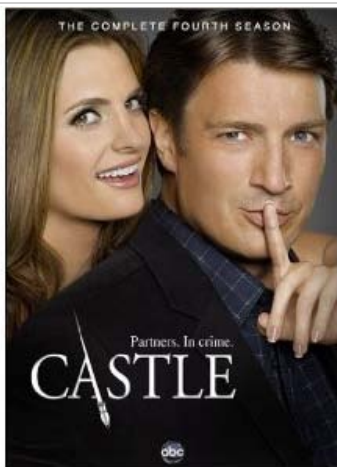


PSYCH SEASON SIX (\$59.98 DVD; Universal)

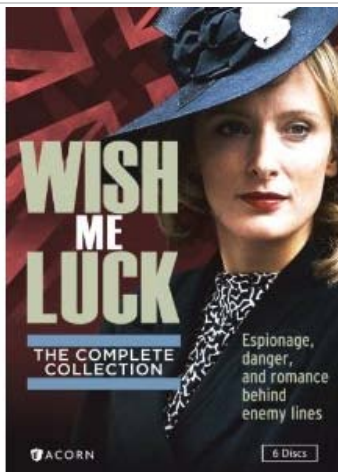
CASTLE SEASON FOUR (\$45.99 DVD; Buena Vista) -- Sometimes I don't want my TV to be ground-breaking and envelope-pushing and filled with zombies and elaborate backstories. Sometimes I



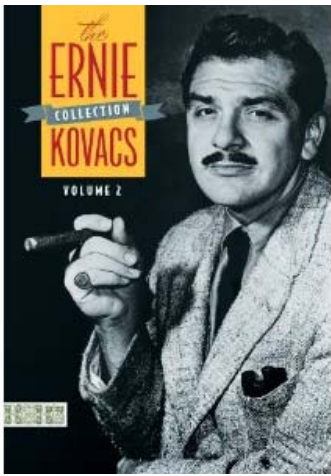
just want to zone out with comfort food of the TV variety, a pleasing series with amiable characters that can gently entertain me for an hour. Enter fun shows like *Psych* and *Castle*. *Psych* is surely nearing the end of its run but the faux psychic Sean (James Roday) and his friend Gus (Dule Hill) remain good company as they solve crimes in jokey, teasing fashion. *Castle* is in better shape since it's only on its fourth season and star Nathan Fillion is as addictive as catnip. (If Hollywood still made 'em like they used to, he'd be a movie star.) Either show is a very dependable source of entertainment. They don't win awards or rock the world, but every once in a while that's exactly what you need.



WISH ME LUCK COMPLETE COLLECTION (\$79.99 DVD; Acorn) -- World War II is a seemingly endless source of fascinating material for books, movies, and tv shows. Take this little known British series from the late 1980s. Based on true stories, of course, it's about women trained to serve as spies in England then dropped into Occupied France to work alongside the French Resistance, every minute of every day a test of their nerve and resolve. It's a corker of a set up and the three seasons offered here nicely follow the war from its early days to D-Day so there's a solid feeling of completeness in the 23 episodes. The cast is very strong but since none of them were major stars, the sense of jeopardy remains paramount throughout.



THE ERNIE KOVACS COLLECTION VOLUME TWO (\$29.93 DVD; Shout) -- The early days of television was a free-for-all. No one knew anything so, technically, there were no rules to be broken. But if there *had* been any rules, Ernie Kovacs would have surely been the first to do so. Volume Two of his pioneering antics that have influenced everyone from David Letterman to Jon Stewart includes all sorts of material I thought you'd have to go to a museum to see in an archive (if you were lucky). We



get eight more episodes from his anarchic morning show, three episodes of his "gameshow" (Groucho has nothing on

Kovacs), an interview with this maverick, a pilot for a series starring Buster Keaton (!) and bonus sketches from here, there and everywhere. A true original.

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