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Michael Giltz

Freelance writer and raconteur

Posted: October 22, 2009 03:47 PM

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DVDs -- Rock N Roll Heaven



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My friend David went to the Rock and Roll Hall Of Fame induction ceremonies year after year, much to my burning jealousy. The next day, I would pump him for information on who said what and which performances were great, which were a mess, who seemed out of it and on and on. Nothing can replace being in the room, of course, but the 9 DVD set *Rock And Roll Hall Of Fame Museum Live* (\$119.96; Time Life) takes some of the sting out of not being there. I generally avoid touting releases available exclusively from only one outlet (you have to go to timelife.com to get this), but it's too much fun to ignore.

I would have preferred DVDs that went chronologically through every year, but instead we get a mishmash of acts, jumping from early inductions like the Beatles (no John and Paul present) to Jackson Browne back to Santana and so on. They were probably worried that the rough quality of the early footage wouldn't hold people's interests. In fact, the slicker, more recent ceremonies shown on TV aren't half as fun as the older clips where you really feel like you're peeking in to a private show. The highlights naturally are the performances, though the speeches (Springsteen inducting Roy Orbison, for example) are a gas too. For every gem there's a ragged jam or an aging misfire, but real fans will eat it up. And every year they end with a spontaneous jam session featuring once in a lifetime pairings of acts, backed by Paul Shaffer's band.

Eight DVDs contain about three hours of material each -- and they still don't have everything I want. I guess I'd only truly be satisfied with a complete record of every ceremony, but that would run about 100 hours, instead of the 25 hours we get here. The final DVD is a 53 minute concert opening up the Hall with John Mellencamp, Aretha Franklin and Al Green among the acts. Nothing can replace being there in person, but at least now I have a much better idea of what I missed.

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SNOW WHITE TURNS BLU - Another friend of mine, Sperling, saw the commercials for this new edition of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (\$39.99 BluRay combo; Disney) and thought, Gee, I need to get that for my kids. Then he glanced in his DVD library and realized he already owned it -- twice! Disney specializes in making reissues of DVDs seem like a brand new event, but when studios complain that DVD sales are "slowing," they're foolishly incapable of realizing that once people have built a library of favorites, they're not going to feel compelled to upgrade every time a new version comes out. And they shouldn't.



If you don't own *Snow White*, by all means by this set or the standard DVD due out November 24 for \$18.99. If you own a BluRay player, you could be tempted to upgrade, because the BluRay does indeed look smashing. When it comes to classic Disney, I've always preferred Pinocchio because he's a much more interesting main character. Snow White and Prince Charming are rather flat, bland people -- even more so when placed side by side with the dwarves who are bursting with personality. But there's no denying the attention to detail -- the hand-drawn excitement of every frame is hypnotic. And if you don't own a copy and you do have kids, now is a perfect time to buy it. Loaded with extras and I do like how the combo pack gives you the BluRay version for your home entertainment center, and a standard DVD for the car player or the kid's room. I wish everyone did this.

FADOS (\$29.99; Zeitgeist) -- Director Carlos Saura has created some of the most innovative and entertaining concert films in history. My favorite is still *Tango*, which rivals *Stop Making Sense* and *Jazz On A Summer's Day* for my best of all time honor. But *Fados* -- his latest film -- is another vibrant entry that combines music and dance in a bewitching 92 minutes with performances by Caetano Veloso, Lila Downs and others. Quite original.



FUTURAMA COMPLETE COLLECTION (\$199.98; Fox) -- I'm a little afraid to talk about *Futurama*, the animated sci-fi series from Matt Groening, who also created a show called *The Simpsons*. I once

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blithely suggested that *Futurama* was in the shadow of *The Simpsons* and in fact deserved to be so. (Not exactly an insult, since *The Simpsons* is one of the landmark sitcoms in TV history.) Well. This was a foolish, dangerous thing to say since the paper I was writing for received a deluge of outraged emails and letters from *Futurama* fans berating my ignorance and extolling the show's superiority to *The Simpsons* and indeed every other TV series in every way. Now every episode and TV movie turned episode is collected in this lavish boxed set which is ironically called *The Complete Collection*. I say ironic because after four seasons on the air from 1999 to 2003 and then four straight to DVD movies that were turned into 16 episodes for a fifth season that aired on Comedy Central, that channel has now signed on for another 26 episodes scheduled to air in mid-2010. So down the road there will be a complete collection, but this is a tempting way to dive into a satirical series that has some of the most passionate fans in TV-dom.

THE COUNTRY TEACHER (\$24.95; Film Movement) -- The latest in the **DVD of the month club** from Film Movement (you can sign on to the series for \$11 a film or just rent or buy the ones that appeal to you for a reasonable regular price). And as with their recent films, it's a gem that shows good taste in whomever is curating this series. I saw it at a Czech film festival in New York City and was delighted when it got a modest theatrical release. A teacher from Prague shows up in a small town and is soon accepted into local life, despite his modestly standoffish ways with the local women, who know a catch when they see one. Our hero opens up a bit, befriending a local widow and tutoring her handsome 17 year old son. Perhaps the word handsome tipped you off to where this film is going. It's a fascinating look at the trust young people place in mentors and how that trust can be betrayed. Director Bohdad Slama is one to watch, the cast is excellent and the story is subtle and moving. One of the best films of the year.

SPONGEBOB SQUAREPANTS: THE FIRST 100 EPISODES (\$99.99; Nickelodeon) -- You can squish and squeeze a sponge any way you want but it always bounces back to its original shape. This series is the same way. There's a remarkable consistency in the tone and style of the show, from its charming first episodes to today. SpongeBob and his world can be the vehicle for simple, kid-centric tales of jealousy and fun or it can be a satiric vehicle that makes much broader points. But at the end of the day everything returns to normal at Bikini Bottom. Compact and no fuss, this is perfect for people who've resisted the earlier boxed sets or just have kids approaching the age where they'd enjoy the show. If you already own the earlier season-long sets, there's no reason to upgrade despite the nifty, compact packaging. The new extras are fine but hardly essential. They were gonna call it a day at one point and I can't help wishing they would, so the show doesn't become repetitive a la *The Simpsons*, but this is durable, funny stuff with a gleeful air of happiness about it that is hard to resist.

HOMICIDE (\$39.98; Criterion) -- David Mamet is a natural writer but perhaps not a natural filmmaker. Nonetheless, he's made a number of films I like and even love, including the atypical *Things Change*, the remake *The Winslow Boy* and this. *Homicide* is an odd duck about a detective (Joe Mantegna) who is vaguely indifferent to his Jewish identity but discovers the rest of the world isn't. His growing paranoia -- the detective sees shadowy plots and Jew-haters in every corner -- is a fascinating look at the little discussed issue of people who are minorities that assume or imagine prejudice around every corner. Perhaps because prejudice itself is so dangerous, few people want to examine the problem of exaggerating or creating out of whole cloth prejudice where none exists or is far more banal than feared. I doubt Mamet would ever make the connection but Mantegna's situation seemed akin to a closeted gay man who fears everyone already knows he is gay and sees hidden meaning in every innocuous comment from friends and family. All this aside, it's a confident, rigorous movie that's tense and memorably distinct, with Mamet's usual ace supporting cast including William H. Macy, Ving Rhames and Rebecca Pidgeon. Also out from Criterion is the Japanese masterwork *The Human Condition* (\$79.95; Criterion) which is almost ten hours long. I'm chomping at the bit to see it, but haven't found the right time yet. As with all Criterion releases, it is packaged with care.

OBSERVE AND REPORT (\$28.98 on DVD por \$35.99 on BluRay; Warner Bros.) -- Here's a film guaranteed to make a splash on DVD. A truly bizarre idea -- a black comedy spin on *Taxi Driver* with a mall cop instead of a cabbie -- *Observe & Report* made a not-bad \$24 million, pretty good for a strange film starring Seth Rogen. But now it can be watched again and again, rediscovered in the next few years the way *Office Space* was rediscovered on DVD. The first step will be the number of Top 10 lists it appears on. The next step is for you to rent or buy it. By the way, on Amazon the BluRay is on sale for \$2 less than the regular DVD. Smart move and they better do that for every title if they want BluRay to ever be anything but a niche product for home theater enthusiasts.

FAME SEASONS 1 & 2 (\$39.98; MGM) -- OK, the film remake of *Fame* was a toothless flop, but it did serve one useful purpose: it got them to release the second season of *Fame* the TV series on DVD. It's part of an inexpensively produced set containing the first and second season that costs the same amount that Season One cost alone when it came out in 2005. I can't claim greatness for the show. But it did put a clever spin on the school-set dramas of the past and the musical and dance numbers are impressive for a

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weekly series. I wish *Glee* would remain a tad more rooted in reality, while *Fame* could have used a little less earnestness and a little more of *Glee*'s playfulness. But they're both distinctive shows that fans of theater and dance shouldn't miss.

BRETT RATNER -- THE SHOOTER SERIES: VOLUME 1 (\$24.95; Genius) -- Here's a good idea that provides a window into a director's career. Sometimes you might get a short film as a bonus feature on a director's film. But *The Shooter Series* aims to provide everything it can get its hands on. In the case of director Brett Ratner, that means about 20 music videos (including "Brown Sugar" for D'Angelo, "Beautiful Stranger" for Madonna, a video and a PSA for Public Enemy and four videos for Mariah Carey), six commercials, four student films, home movies, appearances on talk shows and a new short on his career. While casual fans may not bite, film students and anyone who is a big fan will find the collection fascinating. I'd love to see them do the same for older directors like Scorsese -- it would be fun to see how they've expressed themselves in side projects throughout their careers. But it's most likely to make sense for young directors who made their bones on TV ads and music videos before breaking into Hollywood.

O'HORTEN (\$28.96; Sony) -- This quiet charmer follows Horten, a train engineer who must retire after 40 years on the job though he loves nothing more than his meticulous, orderly work. Like John Cleese's less successful *Clockwise*, it's sweet fun to see the elderly Horten pushed out of his comfort zone, literally sent off the tracks into uncharted territory filled with dogs, men who drive blindfolded to put a little spice in their humdrum lives and the woman who perhaps has been patiently waiting for her train to pull into the station for many years now.

CAGNEY & LACEY: THE MENOPAUSE YEARS (\$39.95; S'more) -- When is the appearance of an acclaimed TV show on DVD frustrating? When it's a batch of TV movies that appeared long after the show's heralded run and only Season One of the show's acclaimed seven seasons (six, if you ignore the brief season with Meg Foster in the Sharon Gless role) has appeared on DVD. Famously canceled after one season only to be brought back and leap into the Top 10, fans of *Cagney & Lacey* will surely be glad to have these four fine TV movies from the mid-90s. But those of us who would love to experience the series in order are still stymied. Surely one of the most acclaimed shows of the 90s deserves better? You can't even find them in syndication. It seems like every TV show in the world has been dumped onto DVD. But in fact, there's a wealth of great TV out there, like *Cagney & Lacey* and *China Beach* and *I'll Fly Away* and many others. By all means, get this. It might just encourage someone to put out the whole megillah.

CLASSIC EDUCATIONAL SHORTS: HOW TO BE A MAN/HOW TO BE A WOMAN (\$19.95 each; Kino) -- I was in a movie when a friend leaned over and whispered how he was tired of films that use old educational shorts for ironic purposes. I understood what he meant, but on their own I still find them fascinating relics of the past. So these two collections of the shorts they used to show in schools when teachers needed a break and wanted to keep the students quiet are a lot of fun. Yes, watching "Act Your Age" from 1949 or "The Decision Is Yours" from 1970 (for the guys) or "Let's Make A Sandwich" (for the gals, natch) can be hilarious. "Look how silly we were" is the standard response. But there's a comfort in the desire to tackle life's problems head on, a surprise in how so many attitudes are still current if not stated so bluntly and a time capsule fascination in looking at the clothes and homes and world presented so matter of factly in these shorts that were mere background to the people that made them but absorbing to us.

KINGS: THE COMPLETE SERIES (\$59.98; Universal) -- A funny thing happened on the way to cancellation for this unusual drama: it became very good. Set up as a parable based on David and Goliath, with Ian McShane as the benevolent king of Gilboa at war with Gath and Chris Egan (vastly improved since *Eragon*) as David the young soldier who becomes a media darling, the show was a strange mix of soap opera and politics and faith. The religious subtext was never quite as fully exploited as I would have liked (though one memorable scene did have our hero David "anointed" by butterflies in a sign from above). But after an episode or two where it seemed just an awkward melange of styles, the show found its stride and became a very distinctive engrossing show. A great cast -- including Dylan Baker, Eamonn Walker and Susanna Thompson -- helped a great deal. A lost opportunity but the 12 episodes here can be enjoyed on their own.

MARLENE (\$29.95; Kino) -- Of course the famously reclusive Marlene Dietrich refused to appear on camera in a documentary film about her life. The real surprise was that she agreed even briefly to be filmed by Maximilian Schell. He got very lucky, since the off camera interviews combined with footage from her career led to one of the most acclaimed documentaries of the 1980s. Dietrich was a real German patriot by denouncing Hitler and actively supporting the Allies throughout World War II, for which she was an outcast for many years in her home country. And while she might not like the comparison, Dietrich is so combative and strong-willed, this makes a fascinating double bill with *The Wonderful*,

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Horrible Life Of Leni Riefenstahl who was forever on the wrong side of history but refused to admit it.

ONE FOOT IN THE GRAVE: THE COMPLETE COLLECTION (\$179.98; BBC Video) -- In real life, cranks are tiresome people who would drive Mother Teresa to distraction. But on TV, they can be delightful. Victor Muldrew (Richard Wilson) is a pill, a 60 year old man forced into early retirement and has nothing to do all day but moan and gripe and bitch and complain about every little indignity of life, from the neighbors to the repairman to the telly. I'd hate to live with him, but it's great fun to visit him and his long-suffering wife (Annette Crosbie). ("Long-suffering wife" is practically her official name.) It ran for six seasons. In the US, that would have meant the show had pummeled into the ground any freshness surrounding the characters. But in typical UK fashion, each season lasted just six episodes. So in fact they only produced 36 episodes and two holiday specials throughout the 90s, which is about a season and a half of shows on a US network. All are gathered here, with modest extras, in one package.

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182 Fans

I humbly submit that the best Rock and Roll Hall of Fame performance so far has been the London Calling jam session when The Clash was inducted.

And, Futurama is MUCH better than The Simpsons. Though Family Guy trumps them both for me

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