

DVDs: The Citizen Kane of TV Dramas? Hill Street Blues

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HILL STREET BLUES: THE COMPLETE SERIES (\$199.99 DVD; Shout Factory) -- On January 15, 1981, I was a 14-year-old kid living in South Florida. At the time, I probably thought I was savvy and informed for paying attention to things like TV Guide's preview of upcoming shows and what had "buzz." So like a few others (a very few others, as it turned out) I knew the premiere of Hill Street Blues was one to watch. So that Thursday night at 10 pm, I sat down and heard a mournful opening theme song and watched a bewildering number of actors flash on the screen during the credit sequence. It was endless, literally endless.

Before I knew it, I was plunged into a drama as vivid and "real" as anything I -- or anyone else -- had ever seen on TV. Hand-held cameras followed characters around the police station and on the streets, creating a documentary feel stunningly different from every other drama. Characters talked with a casual ease, snatches of other conversations drifting in and out of earshot in a style I would later understand was Altman-esque. It was funny, serious, smart...and confusing. It would take me weeks and weeks to sort out who was who, what their names were and what they were like. (No IMDB back in 1981. No internet back in 1981!)

One thing I knew for sure: the stars of the show were Hill and Renko (Michael Warren and Charles Haid), two partners on the force, one black and one white, two men with a rapport and lived-in chemistry -- you knew they'd been working together for years and liked them immediately. At the end of the pilot episode, they walked into a building on a call and were gunned down. The slow-motion nightmare, the shocking finality of it was unmistakable: Hill Street Blues had just killed its stars in the very first hour, a move akin to Alfred Hitchcock killing off Janet Leigh in Psycho. I was, to say the least, blown away. What the hell had just happened? For the next five years, I never missed an episode.

Hill Street Blues is the Citizen Kane, the Bob Dylan, the Picasso, the Virginia Woolf of TV shows. It broke every rule and its influence is so remarkable that just like some other ground-breaking classics, it might not seem so ground-breaking to you anymore. When every innovation you made has been copied or better yet built upon, they tend not to seem like innovations anymore. The large cast, the multi-layered storylines that sometimes lasted one episode or three or ten or an entire season, the visual flair, the bold mix of comedy and drama, the adult sensibility -- all of this was virtually unheard of back in 1981 and certainly no single show had pulled it all together so brilliantly.

It wasn't just that Hill Street Blues raised the bar; it wasn't just influential. Seemingly everyone involved with the show went on to directly create their own great dramas. The spread of its writers and producers was like the Big Bang of television drama. You saw their credits literally everywhere.

A list of some shows created by people who worked extensively on Hill Street Blues: L.A. Law, N.Y.P.D. Blue, Deadwood, Twin Peaks, Miami Vice, the Law & Order franchise, Doogie Howser M.D., and Murder One. In 1982, the same production company -- the great MTM, creators of The Mary Tyler Moore Show -- launched St. Elsewhere, dubbed Hill Street Blues in a hospital, and gave it free creative rein directly due to that company's M.O. and the critical acclaim for Hill Street Blues. Pretty much every other great show of the era seemed to spring from that one including, Homicide: Life On The Streets, Northern Exposure, Oz, I'll Fly Away and the little known but delightful Tattlingers. Between these two batches of shows, you can jump immediately to everything

from *The Sopranos* to *Mad Men*.

As a kid, watching *Hill Street Blues* and paying attention to the drama that surrounded the making of the show as much as the show itself, I got a master's class in TV scheduling, marketing, the politics at the networks, the potential power of awards shows like the Emmys, how one series (in this case *The Cosby Show*) could turn a network around and in turn boost others like *Hill Street Blues* (and *Cheers* and *Family Ties*) and much much more. TV would never be the same and in some ways, neither would I.

Here's the theme song. (Note: this is not the remastered look of the new boxed set, which looks great, includes every episode at their original broadcast length and includes a substantial making-of documentary and various commentary tracks.)

THE STORY

The drama centered around Captain Frank Furillo (Daniel Travanti) and the people of Hill Street station. Their precinct was found in an unnamed city fighting off urban blight. Think Chicago or the Hill District of Philadelphia (that's my personal choice since it links the show to another touchstone of mine, the plays of August Wilson). The cops dealt with gangs, petty thieves, violent crimes, lack of funding and not least of all each other. Each episode began with a roll call, where the cops coming on duty would get a rundown of any pertinent information, like particular assignments or a wave of crimes they needed to look out for. It ended, always, with Sgt. Esterhaus (Michael Conrad) saying some variation on, "Let's be careful out there." It wasn't a catch phrase, as such. It was a sober reminder that their job was dangerous and serious and dropping your guard even for a moment could cost you or your partner their life.

Most episodes lasted one day, beginning in the morning and ending that night, not that I noticed this at first. The comic would frequently alternate with the dramatic. Furillo's annoying ex-wife (Barbara Bosson) might pop in with a complaint or Det. Belker (Bruce Weitz) might growl at a criminal he'd arrested. Literally growl. I didn't really care for the banal humor of Lt. Howard Hunter (James B. Sikking) and his SWAT team or the bleeding heart liberalism of Sgt. Henry Goldblume (Joe Spano). The show wasn't perfect. Those characters would grow more nuanced with time and there were a dozen others that held my attention.

And let me be clear: Hunter felt like a cartoon, but it wasn't a poorly drawn character I didn't like when I reacted to Goldblume, it was to this very real person, this knee-jerk softie. Captain Furillo had to deal with him patiently and professionally and sometimes even listen to him and give the guy a chance to prove himself, even as Goldblume became attuned to the world they were working in as opposed to his idealized take on life. I didn't say "This character feels fake," I said, "Boy, what a pain this guy is," just like you might with any co-worker. But there he stubbornly remained and eventually, I came to realize he was alright, as Goldblume matured and earned my respect. How often does a TV show do something like that?

At the same time, cops would go out on calls and I soon learned that a robbery in progress was dangerous of course but what cops really didn't like were domestic disputes. Those were entirely unpredictable and could veer from the silly to serious (with cops serving as marriage counselors) to suddenly violent. My heart would literally race when cops driving in their police car went out on a domestic dispute. A robbery in progress, in contrast, was comforting -- you knew what to expect and knew the cops wouldn't be letting their guard down.

The range of what cops did was eye-opening to me: they calmed people down, they lost their temper, they resolved arguments so no one had to file a complaint (and they didn't have to file paperwork), they chased after bad guys, kept their eyes opened, freaked out if their partner didn't automatically have their back in a crisis, worried about what to tell their bosses if their car was scratched or dented (or worse, missing), got hungry, dealt with personal issues and at any moment might find their lives in danger.

I don't know if it's true any more, but for a long time most cops would cite the sitcom *Barney Miller* as the most

realistic cop show, the series that captured the actual day to day boredom of being a cop and what it was actually like. (It ended its seven year run in 1982, one year after Hill Street Blues began.) The matter of fact style of Barney Miller surely does capture the actual work of being a cop. But the drama of Hill Street Blues was great television and drove home to those who weren't cops exactly how frightening and thrilling the job could be. Every era seemed to have a cop show branded as the one that was really "it," the hard-nosed way things truly were: they ranged from the now laughable Dragnet to the just plain silly Kojak (which has a magnetic central performance but little else). The idea of these as realistic seems laughable now but that's exactly how they were touted. The laughing stopped with Hill Street Blues.

THE SCHEDULING

In the beginning, just finding out when Hill Street Blues was airing required detective work of the highest order. The series featured new episodes on four different nights during its first season. I remember well when they "permanently" moved the series -- the ads on NBC touted "Tuesday is 'Blues' Day." Thank God, I thought; I could remember that! Then they moved it again. Ultimately, it landed on Thursdays at 10 pm, eventually serving as the capper to arguably the greatest night of TV on one network in history. (That evening included for two years The Cosby Show, Family Ties, Cheers and Hill Street Blues, with seasons before and after also including Taxi and The Days and Nights Of Molly Dodd but more often the inferior but mildly pleasant Night Court. CBS on Saturdays in the 1970s was right up there with it, thanks to a 1973 season that included All In The Family, MASH, The Mary Tyler Moore Show, The Bob Newhart Show and The Carol Burnett Show as the night cap. I learned about all these famed schedules because Hill Street Blues taught me to pay attention to time slots and lead-ins and network executives like Brandon Tartikoff.)

By the way, watching a show that aired on Thursdays at 10 p.m. meant being at home on Thursday night at 10 p.m., every single week. VCRS existed but weren't exactly common (and not always trustworthy -- a brownout might mean it didn't record that night at all). Watching a TV show was a commitment, more like a marriage or at least serious dating. You'd go out with a drama or sitcom for an episode or two, but if things weren't clicking you'd move on. If you weren't at home on Thursday night at 10 p.m., that was it. You'd missed that episode and might never see it again. Maybe in the summer you'd be lucky and catch it during reruns but essentially, it appeared once and was gone forever. No Hulu. No Netflix. No DVDs. No complete seasons on VHS. Nothing. People would arrange their lives around a favorite TV show -- no movies, no dinners out, no friends over unless they would shut up and watch the TV show too. You didn't want to miss an episode of your favorite shows and for the first time with Hill Street Blues, missing an episode meant you'd really be lost as to what had happened and what was going on. That never happened with Bonanza.

I love the DVR and would never go back. But there was a certain romance, a definite frisson to sitting down at the same time each week and watching a show you knew other fans were watching too. I knew some people were defiantly not watching. Not because they didn't like the show, but because it was too real, too upsetting. Soon, I would jokingly take my cue for the week based on how Hill Street Blues ended. Some episodes ended on a sexy, warm note and I knew the week would be good. Some episodes ended sadly, brutally, with cops devastated at the scene of a shooting and I knew the week was going to be rough. But I knew one thing for certain: at the end of the week, I'd be ready to watch another episode.

THE INNOVATIONS

The large cast -- Hill Street Blues had a sprawling cast of main characters and recurring roles that was unprecedented in primetime, even for most soaps. Obviously, daytime dramas had dealt with large casts for years, but a network drama with so many people up on the screen was very bold...and very expensive. (Soaps had large casts but often paid the price with cheap sets.) That large cast was also two people larger than expected: Hill and Renko didn't actually die in the pilot. Oh, they were supposed to and it was shot that way. But the two actors were so good, the characters so off-the-charts appealing that for the first and perhaps only time

they wimped out creatively and brought the guys back after some time in the hospital.

Just as importantly, that large cast featured men and women, blacks and whites and Hispanics. There's a reason Betty Thomas was nominated for an Emmy every single year the show ran: her tough, complicated Sgt. Lucy Bates was ground-breaking for the ways in which it showed her doing her job, trying to be one of the boys and yet somehow maybe sacrificing a little bit of herself to do so. Cagney & Lacey and China Beach, to name just two, owe her a debt.

You had the "street smart" Det. Neal Washington (Taurean Blacque), a potentially cliched role to which Blacque brought intelligence and dignity. More importantly, we saw Washington covering for and calling out his partner J.D. LaRue (Kiel Martin), an undependable alcoholic. This relationship showed the bond two partners could have, how it was like family with all the ups and downs that implied. And it showed Washington as the responsible, mature one, turning any stereotypes on its head. Usually, the savvy man of the streets couldn't be bothered to play by the rules. Not here. You also had the handsome, smooth and smart Officer Bobby Hill (Warren), who was partnered with good ole' boy Renko (Haid) and how their relationship as friends was complicated and nuanced in countless little ways.

Lt. Ray Calletano (Rene Enriquez) was an office-bound worker, prickly about his pride and his under-appreciated role at the station. Like so many others, he was a complex person: Calletano was allowed to be a little thin-skinned but he was also allowed to be right. I still remember the episode where he received some major award for his work, an occasion where Calletano pointedly said how the only other brown faces he saw in the room filled with his contemporaries on the police force were the waiters and waitresses. It was an uncomfortable moment and typically it probably hurt his character's career. Nothing really changed but at least he'd taken a stand.

Others had paved the way on race of course: Bill Cosby was the first actor to win an Emmy, for his role on the light-hearted I Spy where race seemingly didn't matter. But Hill Street Blues had a straightforward approach to race and all its complications that I took for granted. It wasn't just the diverse casting. They didn't cast a black man as a noble, good cop and say, "We're done!" They kept race an ever-present if often unspoken subtext to everything that went on, just like life.

The look and sound -- The raw, handheld nature of the way Hill Street Blues was shot was simply remarkable. And did any show before it truly have a sound design? The way snatches of dialogue would be heard as people walked through the station house was unheard of for tv (and still pretty ground-breaking in the movies where Robert Altman made it a signature). Other shows had looked good and featured great cinematographers. Peter Gunn (which has a brilliant pilot) looked as snazzy as any movie and had a catchy score to boot. The Prisoner (more a miniseries than an ongoing show) was certainly distinctive. But the aesthetic of Hill Street Blues powered the story like never before. It created a realness that was shocking and vivid. When the cops ran down an alleyway, you ran down the alleyway with them. Soon, more and more shows would embrace a distinctive look until it became required for any serious drama. Miami Vice would wet down the streets to make them look as photogenic as possible. Twin Peaks would show a directorial visual style like never before. (Both featured Hill Street alums among their creators.) Today, widescreen TVs and the visual panache of everything from Breaking Bad to Battlestar Galactica is commonplace. Hill Street Blues made that essential.

The sexiness -- Other shows had sex, from daytime soaps to their primetime brethren like Dallas and Peyton Place. Many shows had good-looking stars or the jiggle factor (think Charlie's Angels.) But Hill Street Blues was...erotic. Sgt. Esterhaus turned Michael Conrad into an unlikely sex symbol because his character went from dating a high school senior to combustible sex with his contemporary Grace Gardner (a marvelous Barbara Babcock). He was a man of a certain age and the show's frank pleasure in showing these two mature adults as sexual beings was delightful and funny and a turn-on. Many, many other characters had rich personal sex lives as well.

But the heart of the show was the relationship between Furillo and defense attorney Joyce Davenport (Veronica Hamel). Their romance was an open secret but it was still handled discretely by the two of them. Many episodes ended with them together romantically. Sometimes they'd be interrupted by a call, with one or another having to leave to handle a crisis. But more often than not, she'd teasingly call him "Pizza Man" and they'd tumble into bed or a bathtub. These were adults, they weren't married and believe you me they didn't keep one foot on the floor. It was a long way from the days where couples on TV had separate beds. I vividly remember one episode where the two of them were canoodling in the final moments of the show, the screen went black but the audio continued and you suddenly heard a giggle and very evocative squeal of pleasure. I was 14 and I'm pretty sure I blushed.

The sadness -- It's true Hill Street Blues pulled back from killing off two vivid characters in the pilot. But that aura of danger remained throughout the show. The emotional toil of police work and the violence they saw or dealt out was real. When episodes didn't end with a sexy fadeout, they often ended in the dead of night at some crime scene. You might see a cop break down in tears. This wasn't the first time -- Barney Miller had memorably shown a cop crying at home alone after killing a man. Twin Peaks in the future would garner laughter and ultimately uncomfortable truth out of showing a cop breaking down every time he was at a crime scene where there was a dead body. That willingness to let messy emotions be on display for its central characters (and not just guest stars who could unravel and then disappear) was new. Life wasn't always fun? Try, life was rarely fun.

The overlapping storylines -- Again, daytime soaps and their primetime counterparts were the trailblazers. But never had a serious drama played out its stories with such complexity. Some storylines began and ended in a single episode. Others might last two or three or four. Others might go on for a whole season or disappear and then pop back in again after you'd almost forgotten about them. It was a verisimilitude that was highly effective. Season-long arcs, self-contained seasons, a bold mix of brief and extended plots are now all part and parcel of the best TV dramas. They became possible right here. (One earlier precursor was The Life and Legend Of Wyatt Earp, which somewhat followed the career of Earp, often letting him move to a new town and new setting when a new season began.)

The politics - I don't just mean the local politics of the city where Hill Street station was located, though the political angle of Furillo's job was fascinating. It was clear very early on that Captain Furillo was a by-the-books sort of guy. He understood if police used their own initiative and bent the rules on rare occasions to follow the spirit of the law and make it easier for citizens. But god help you if you bent the rules to make life easier for yourself. A glare from Furillo or a righteous dressing down was something to be feared. And dirty cops were unthinkable. Yet in a sign of the show's genuine complexity, Furillo could also be a little self-righteous, a little too unbending in his principles. His superior Chief Fletcher Daniels (a wonderful Jon Cypher) was both oily and somehow duly impressed by Furillo, when not just frustrated. He'd constantly be urging Frank to "play ball" in order to get ahead or make life easier on Furillo and his men. (Or more to the point, easier on Daniels.) A by-the-rules cop was hardly an innovation. But to see how it hurt Furillo's career was fascinating. And a word here or there from cops and detectives from other precincts let us know that the people we admired so much had a reputation -- and not a good one. They were seen as Boy Scouts, as goody-two-shoes. You almost got the sense that some other cops laughed at them. Sure these were often dirty cops but still somehow it stung. And that too was an interesting insight into peer pressure.

THE AWARDS

With a show this complex, this daring, this emotionally raw, is it any surprise Hill Street Blues was a flop? In its first season, the show ranked 87th out of 96 shows in primetime. It was the lowest rated show in the history of television to get renewed for a second season. And then came the Emmys. It received a tidal wave of nominations and won eight awards including Best Drama, more than any other first season show in history. At the time, it won more Emmys than any other show in history and received more nominations (98) than any other

show in history. The only reason it didn't win more was because so often it was competing with itself. One year, every single Best Supporting Actor in a Drama nomination was for Hill Street Blues.

Just as the Emmys would bring Cagney & Lacey back from the dead and spotlighted other shows, they turned Hill Street Blues into a media phenomenon, a series that for most of its run got a lot more press than ratings, just like Mad Men today. It wasn't until Fame debuted in 1982 and NBC branded Thursday night as "the best night of television on television" that Hill Street Blues approached anything like a popular hit, peaking at #21. It was paired with Fame, Cheers and Taxi in the fall. Even the juggernaut that was The Cosby Show -- which arrived in 1984 -- couldn't do more than bring it back up to #30. Still, if NBC had tried to cancel it, they would have faced the ire of an entire industry. Like the old joke that says everyone who bought a Velvet Underground album went out and formed a band, seemingly everyone who watched and worked on Hill Street Blues went out and created a TV show. No show could ever be as important as this one without going back in a time machine to 1981. You can only invent jazz once and Louis Armstrong was there. You can only push drama into the future once and Hill Street Blues was there.

THE FINAL MYSTERY

But still, there's a mystery. Why was Hill Street Blues (practically) the first great drama? Why did dramas take so long to catch up with the enduring quality of sitcoms? From the beginning of TV, classic sitcoms and sketch comedies have appeared, shows that play as marvelously now as the day they were created. And yet dramas, by and large, were dated as soon as they aired. The best dramas of earlier eras simply don't hold up very well. You can pick out classic sitcoms from every decade of TV history. Classic dramas pre-Hill Street Blues that are worth revisiting today? Almost none. Quite a few have their charms, but they're not a patch on the dramas of today, any more than the herky-jerky shorts made for nickelodeon machines can compare to the Hollywood gems that appeared later.

Early on, TV produced the genre-defining sitcoms The Honeymooners and I Love Lucy. Great sketch comedies included Your Show Of Shows (a series with a writing room even more fabled than that of Hill Street Blues). You can watch the best of their sketches and laugh your head off. You can watch the best episodes of Jackie Gleason and company or the antics of Lucy Ricardo and enjoy yourself immensely. Great sitcoms kept coming: the homespun appeal of The Andy Griffith Show, the sophistication of The Dick Van Dyke Show the cynicism of MASH, the scathing social commentary of All In The Family and all of it capped by the greatest sitcom of all time, The Mary Tyler Moore Show. (Unlike so many others, that one allowed its characters to change and grow. It also had the good sense to walk away after seven seasons, before the quality started to slip. Like the Beatles, it got better year after year and then stopped, leaving its legend intact.)

TV dramas certainly had their standard bearers in the early days. Mostly, they were anthologies, shows that started from scratch every week and occasionally created brilliant one-off programs like Twelve Angry Men. Only one drama that wasn't an anthology (the comforting Gunsmoke) won Best Drama during the first decade of the Emmys. (And talk about dramatically static: 20 years and Matt Dillon never married Miss Kitty!) Then came a run for The Defenders. It and Naked City and other cop shows often featured some great talent in guest roles. Some individual episodes could really strike home. Road shows like The Fugitive and Route 66 were de facto anthologies. Acclaim reached earnest dramas like Lou Grant and The White Shadow and Family in the 1970s. The Waltons and Little House On The Prairie had strong starts, but couldn't maintain the quality; they soon sank into melodrama, albeit of a low-key sort. James Garner had charm to burn in Maverick and The Rockford Files. I watched and enjoyed many of these, but they don't hold up well as great television. They were far superior to the other dramas on the air, of course, but simply don't stand the test of time the way we expect Breaking Bad, The Wire, Buffy The Vampire Slayer and The Sopranos et al to do in the future.

It took Hill Street Blues to open the door to the first great rush of TV drama, one that has continued unabated right up to today. But why? Film and theater produced great, enduring dramas long before TV came along. Why

did TV dramas lag behind TV comedies? Of course, TV had a relentless demand for material, unlike movies and the theater. A sitcom in the old days might produce 25 or 30 episodes a year -- akin to writing ten feature films. A drama might need enough material in one season to make 15 movies. (Glenn Gordon Caron tried to write about ten screwball comedies a year for Moonlighting and it practically killed him.) Frankly, creating that much material that simply didn't suck was a miracle.

But comedies thrive on repetition, while repetition is the bane of drama. Laurel and Hardy can push that piano up some steps and almost get to the top, only to see it slide back down again and you laugh. The Little Tramp skirts around authority and you smile. One of the pleasures of comedy is seeing everything return to normal. Lucy and Ethel can get in wacky adventures on a factory production line or stomping grapes or trying to weasel into Ricky's show but at the end of the episode they're all back where they began. It's that playful variation on a theme that can make so many comedies enjoyable. And you can do it -- if you're inventive and clever enough -- week after week after week.

But the same beats in a drama, week after week? No good. You end up with self-contained episodes, a series that spins its wheels but goes nowhere emotionally. Any one episode might be good. Next week it might be bad. But there was no cumulative effect, no increasing power in the story you were telling or the world you were creating. You didn't care for the cops on Naked City any more at the end of the show's run than you did at the beginning. The World War II drama Combat had some great attributes. But you knew the guys in that unit were safe and only the guest stars might bite the bullet, just as the "red shirts" on an away mission in Star Trek were sitting ducks.

Tellingly, you can watch almost any episode in any order on shows like Combat or The Rockford Files or The Honeyymooners and it doesn't make a difference. That's not true for The Mary Tyler Moore Show and it's certainly not true for Hill Street Blues. Watch them in order and The Mary Tyler Moore Show tells a compelling story about a woman coming into her own. (Watch them out of order and you'll certainly laugh and smile, but something is lost. The Mary Richards of season one is a very different woman from the Mary Richards of season seven) That's true times ten for Hill Street Blues. You lived and died with the men and women of Hill Street because the more time you spent with them, the better you got to know them, the more you learned about them and saw them make mistakes or earn a small triumph or simply get through the day without screwing up.

That storytelling power -- so often referred to as novelistic -- is fairly unique to television. You'd need a series of novels (and they do exist, of course) to capture both the detail and span of time in a long-running drama. The serialized nature of the episodes, the real-time of years in which their lives unfolded for us and more all added up to a maturity, sophistication and particular impact that can't be replicated in just one film or one play or one book. And Hill Street Blues opened that door. TV's Achilles' heel -- the need to create dozens of episodes year after year -- became its strength when Hill Street Blues realized they didn't need to tell hundreds of stories but just one story of a police station and its people and community, an on-going story with serious intent and purpose.

THE GREAT DRAMA THAT CAME BEFORE "HILL STREET BLUES"

Before it, television succeeded best in drama via the anthology or a TV movie or miniseries with a clear beginning, middle and end. Limited-runs like Holocaust and I, Claudius and Brideshead Revisited (which came out in the UK the same year that Hill Street Blues debuted) were the benchmark of quality. One drama -- a sort of hybrid before Hill Street Blues and a precursor to the many excellent cable dramas that would follow -- matched it in quality. But Upstairs, Downstairs was not a rule-breaker like Hill Street Blues. In many ways, it was the apotheosis of TV drama up to that time.

It did unintentionally innovate by being a British series and thus not slave to the massive appetite of American TV. They produced 13 episodes for most seasons of that drama and eventually cable tv and networks realized

it's a lot easier to maintain quality when you're only producing, say, twelve episodes a year rather than twenty-four. (And 24 will find that out soon enough since its new miniseries contains just 12 hours rather than one episode for every hour of the day.) But the sets were rickety early on (actors sometimes almost threatened to tip them over) and visually the presentation was pure theater. Theater of the highest order, mind you: Upstairs, Downstairs remains one of the crown jewels of tv and has stood the test of time brilliantly. (Watch it and you'll be ashamed of fawning over Downton Abbey.) It proved that greatness could be achieved in the style for which TV dramas had been laboring for 25 years.

Like its period setting, Upstairs Downstairs was looking backwards. Hill Street Blues blazed a new path forward. Great TV is never easy. Imagine creating a new comedy short to exhibit in movie theaters every single week. The sitcom created an entirely new system just to meet the demand of television -- a team of writers, multi-camera set-ups, a show-runner overseeing the vision and an odd combination of a movie set and live theater to bring it to life. But the episodic nature of TV proved ideal for what comedy does best. In contrast, the self-contained episode of a drama was by and large limiting. It could work, of course. The original Law & Order was the creative peak of that form, just as Upstairs, Downstairs was the ultimate expression of the soap opera.

But after Hill Street Blues, the much richer vein of extended storytelling produced one great enduring show after another. TV dramas would create a complex world and explore it, as in The Wire's dissection of Baltimore institution by institution and I'll Fly Away's exploration of the Deep South during the Civil Rights era. Or they focused on discrete seasons with a singular purpose (24, Buffy The Vampire Slayer) or most ambitiously of all told one long story with a distinct beginning, middle and end (Battlestar Galactica and Breaking Bad).

Comedy benefitted in other ways from the nature of TV: waiting a week to see a new episode made the repetition less notable. That's why indulging in more than two episodes of a comedy in one evening grows tiresome. In contrast, binge watching of the best dramas is very satisfying, like getting caught up with a novel you just can't put down.

THE END BEFORE THE END

And yet, before Hill Street Blues aired the series finale on May 12, 1987, I had stopped watching. The show's co-creator Stephen Bochco (along with Michael Kozoll, who had left after two seasons) was fired, albeit after many, many fights with the network and his bosses at MTM. (That company was so admired that its head Grant Tinker left to run NBC. Bochco's new bosses weren't as indulgent of the show's high budget and low ratings, especially since they rightly knew the serialized nature of the show meant it would be a bust in syndication. Hill Street Blues brought them prestige but it also cost them money. Indeed, I was almost embarrassed for the series when I finally spotted it airing in reruns -- not stripping five days a week in the early evening hours like the choicest sitcoms, but indifferently tossed out in the wee hours of the morning, long after everyone had gone to bed.)

I didn't exactly stop watching out of fierce loyalty to Bochco and Kozoll's vision. But season six began and the network had finally had their way. The jerky camera movements were smoothed out, the cast had been trimmed and I was horrified. It felt like a clone of Hill Street Blues, a vaguely related spin-off. Something felt wrong and I literally couldn't bear to see it. It ran for two more seasons and then it was gone. I saw a still from the final episode so know something of what happened. But now I have this boxed set. For the first time since it aired, I can watch the original five seasons in order and then gingerly work my way through the last two. I'll dive into the commentaries and the extensive making-of documentary. I'll probably take a break between the first five years and the last two, just because.

So Hill Street Blues changed television but it didn't change the fortunes of NBC. (People involved with it created Miami Vice and L.A. Law and many others, so the hits would come later.) I had already become fascinated with TV scheduling thanks to this show and NBC's rise to the top. The network's ratings surge began not with The

Cosby Show in 1984 (and certainly not with Hill Street Blues) but with the 1983 debut of The A-Team, which was an immediate Top Ten hit. If you want to see how far TV has come since Hill Street Blues debuted -- and how far it can sink again -- just watch that witless program and thank god for the men and women of Hill Street station.

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Note: Michael Giltz is provided with free copies of DVDs and Blu-rays with the understanding that he would be considering them for review. Generally, he does not guarantee to review and he receives far more titles than he can cover.