

DVDs: Young Bruce Wayne, Young Carol Burnett, Young Brian Wilson and More

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Loads of TV, an acclaimed movie about the Beach Boys, "lost" Carol Burnett and more highlight this batch of new releases on DVD, BluRay, digital download or however you choose to consume your entertainment of choice. Let's dive in!

ARROW SEASON 3 (\$60.10 BluRay; Warner Home Entertainment)

THE FLASH SEASON 1 (\$60.10 BluRay; Warner Home Entertainment)

GOTHAM SEASON 1 (\$60.10 BluRay; Warner Home Entertainment)

Marvel may be killing it at the cinema, but DC is killing it on TV. The two perennial giants of comic books are used to their own universes and apparently DC's is in your home. Arrow has proven a game-changer for Warner Bros. (the studio behind the show), powering the CW for the last few years and helping to launch The Flash to similar acclaim and ratings success. I found Arrow pretty angsty and silly from the start but fans have clearly embraced it, including the comic book fans who can school me on the many variations of this character over the years and what the show gets right. That didn't stop me from checking out The Flash but I thought the pilot was awful. Huge ratings followed (by CW standards) and now here comes Season 1 on disc. Like others who have noticed the show and realize it's here for the long haul, now I have a chance to give IT another chance by watching the episodes in order. The one that has sort of worked for me is Gotham. Mainly, I'm a fan of Benjamin McKenzie (he of The OC, bitch!) who has grown with Southland and now this into a genuine TV star. The show also benefitted from letting villains apparently dominate a season long arc, rather than popping them in and out, always to return. Surely, villains can always come back (even from the dead) but it's good Gotham at least creates the sense of actual danger since we're so used to our heroes being bulletproof. McKenzie could be Bruce Wayne, but of course here he's the mentor to Bruce Wayne as Commissioner-To-Be James Gordon. Here's hoping the just-launched season two has him working more with the compelling David Mazouz.

LOVE & MERCY (\$24.99 BluRay; Lionsgate)

QUEEN AND COUNTRY (\$24.98 DVD; BBC)

Capturing an artist on film -- the creative process they undergo -- has to be one of the most challenging tasks for a film. Derring-do? Falling in love? Revenge? That's easy compared to showing a poet or painter in action. So here is the relatively rare film about an artist that works. It's not just any artist. Love & Mercy captures Brian Wilson of the Beach Boys at his peak. The Beatles delivered the marvelous one-two punch of Rubber Soul and Revolver and in response to the first album Brian Wilson and the Beach Boys delivered their masterpiece Pet Sounds. That in turn pushed the Beatles towards Sgt. Pepper. The miracle here is that Love & Mercy captures all this with drama and genuine artistic excitement. The praise for the film has been strong, though some dislike the bifurcated nature of the tale. The movie jumps between Wilson at his peak and Wilson later in life, troubled by mental health issues and trying to reclaim his mojo. (Remarkably, that would happen when he finally delivered Smile and it was damn near as good as one could hope.) Paul Dano is so good he might well be remembered come Oscar time. And John Cusack as the older, troubled Wilson has his advocates too. But whatever happens come awards time, this small gem will surely find a wider audience than ever in people's

homes and happily send folk to Pet Sounds. It's no criticism of the movie to say that album is the real masterpiece here and the more folk that discover it, the happier all involved will be.

Queen And Country did not enjoy the praise and long, art house run of Love & Mercy. It's a sequel to Hope & Glory, director John Boorman's childhood memory of war that showed from a kid's point of view, war could be pretty much a lark. Queen And Country isn't a patch that career peak but it is ideal for Anglophones and anyone who enjoyed that earlier film. Whereas Love & Mercy built up a lot of cred during its theatrical run, this one practically disappeared. It will prove a welcome discovery for anyone who seeks it out.

THE CAROL BURNETT SHOW: THE LOST EPISODES (\$59.95 DVD; Time Life)

SISTERS SEASON 1 AND 2 (\$44.99 DVD; Shout! Factory)

PEANUTS EMMY HONORED COLLECTION (\$26.99 DVD; Warner Home Entertainment)

I grew up watching Carol Burnett, but I'm not THAT old! Plus, the show barely existed in reruns and those reruns were sad, truncated affairs of sketches from later seasons for various technical and music rights reasons. Many of its "hits" are etched in my brain and the various compilations and excellent boxed sets of recent years were a delightful bit of nostalgia and good old comedy. But here is something completely different. Here we have 16 uncut episodes from the show's first five seasons, shows that haven't been seen at all. Not once! So for most people, even a fan like me, these are essentially brand new. True they are a little more rickety than the episodes in color that I know and love, sketches from when the show was firing on all cylinders. The pleasure here is not in seeing perfection, but watching the birth of classic characters and routines that would grow and change over the years. It's seeing a young Burnett doing just about anything and realizing she can get away with it. It's seeing a parade of celebrity guests. For someone who has never seen Burnett's peak years, this is not the place to start. For those who know and love her classic variety show, this is a treat.

Sisters is another landmark show, but one more for what it did than for what it is. Sometimes, shows break down barriers but that is more of an enduring accomplishment than the actual series itself. That may, I fear, be the case here. Sisters was unique for its focus on women and their concerns and the checklist of issues that the show tackled with frankness and fearlessness is impressive. Still, one must admit it's a bit dated. For some reason, I believe thirtysomething will be less dated, perhaps because it was so specific in its self-critical, self-awareness. But I haven't proven that by actually re-watching that landmark series that came in this show's wake. The saving grace here is the excellent cast, led by Swoozie Kurtz and Sela Ward. For years, they made Saturday night at 10 pm a haven for smart viewers. It's a pity of course they couldn't just release all six seasons in one boxed set since anyone who cares would want the whole thing. But you take what you can get.

Now, Peanuts are a perennial. Ask me to name their TV specials and like most I would start and end with the Halloween one and the classic Christmas one. But here are eleven more -- eleven (!) and by no means all, apparently. You won't be surprised to hear they're not up to the standards of A Charlie Brown Christmas or even the lesser It's The Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown. These aired from 1975 to 1990, but most date from the 1980s and it shows. The strip was a little tired by then and the TV specials were tired too, lacking the distinctive score of Vince Guaraldi. And frankly, why not just box them all together in one set? You do get a bushel of specials but only two are new to DVD (five have been remastered). Surely it's time for a definitive set? It's hard to imagine the consumer who would buy this that didn't want to buy them all.

FURIOUS 7 (\$34.98 BluRay; Universal)

The Fast & Furious franchise is almost unique in film history. With one exception, every film in this series has proven more popular than the one before. Is it the multi-culti cast? Is it the over-the-top action that is somehow still rooted in the real world the way action in a James Bond film perhaps is not? Is it just...cars? No, it's the Rat Pack vibe of the ensemble. From Vin Diesel to the late Paul Walker to Michelle Rodriguez on down, everyone seems to be having a blast. They know it's silly, they know it's popcorn fare and they love it. The sense that they

had as much fun making it as you should have watching it is infectious. And I don't mean the dismissive attitude of those 1970s movies where the endless bloopers made it seem like the actors didn't give a damn about the actual film they were making as long as they had fun on the set. No, the actors here seem determined to entertain and audiences continue to eat it up. Will it continue now that Walker is gone? This upward trajectory can't go on forever and maybe some magic will be gone. But FF remains a remarkable accomplishment, even if only diehard fans can remember what happened in FF4 versus FF2 versus FF7.

AMERICAN EXPERIENCE: WALT DISNEY (\$24.99 DVD; PBS)

CINDERELLA (\$36.99 BluRay; Disney)

Walt Disney is a complex, towering figure in American pop culture. It's no surprise he's one of the few to qualify for the four hour, American Experience treatment rather than the more typical two hours devoted to a single person. It is surprising that this look at his life falls far short. It feels superficial and glib, both overly familiar and not nearly penetrating enough. It breaks no new ground and doesn't cover the well-known contours of Uncle Walt's life with the definitiveness it deserves. If you know absolutely nothing about him, the parade of talking heads (some great like Neal Gabler, many others less so) will I suppose inform. But for such a sprawling affair, somehow you feel they barely scratch the surface. One area where it does succeed is in the research that went into it. The behind-the-scenes archivists did turn up a treasure trove of home movies, studio footage, rare audio and more. For those with a passionate interest, that will prove enticement enough. Of course, they'll be the ones more than most who recognize how little else here is of note.

Disney was first and foremost a creative force. The man who used his TV show to promote his theme park and his theme park to promote his movies and his movies to promote his albums and books and his albums and books to promote his TV show? He loved synergy and creative recycling more than anyone. Witness his savvy protection of the studio's crown jewels, the animated films that weren't always successes right away but could be re-released every seven years or so to a new crop of kids and thus become enduring and profitable classics. So if anyone would have appreciated the way his company now turns properties into Broadway musicals and then TV shows and then back into movies, it would be Uncle Walt. He might have done a more distinctive job than this live action remake of Cinderella. But a juicy turn by Cate Blanchett, prestige direction from Kenneth Branagh, family friendly fare with a modest feminist slant to make it new and especially worldwide box office of more than \$500 million? He would most definitely approve.

MODERN FAMILY SEASON 6 (\$39.98 DVD; Fox)

HOMELAND SEASON 4 (\$49.99 BluRay; Fox)

VICIOUS SEASON 2 (\$29.99 DVD; PBS)

Modern Family did not make Emmy history and win Best Comedy for six seasons in a row. And thank god for that. If you want to know why, you need look no further. The show has had far more passionate advocates than I, but even they would admit it has long worn out its welcome and become a dim version of its former self. Everything now feels forced and too clever and the large cast feels more oppressive than expansive as in the first year or two. It remains very popular and likely will run as long as the cast agrees.

Homeland didn't wear out its welcome. It's just a great miniseries that unfortunately thought it was a TV show. If they had made season one as a complete event and stopped there, its reputation would be great. Instead it immediately went off the rails completely in season two, tried to end things up in season three and reboot in season four. It's a frantic, tangled dramatic arc for a show that had a complete storyline...one that should have lasted 12 episodes. Ever since Lost, TV creators seem incapable of realizing that high concept shows like Homeland simply CAN'T be a long-running TV series. The best actors in the world can't mask that fact and with Claire Danes and Mandy Patinkin Homeland has prove that to a fault.

Now, no one really thinks Vicious is good, least of all the actors involved. Some might feel this series about two

gay men of a certain age living in bitchy domestic "bliss" surrounded by their female best friend, a handsome young straight neighbor and various hangers-on is good trashy fun. And they'd be right about the trashy. It's weirdly compelling since the show features Ian McKellen and Derek Jacobi -- two of the greatest actors alive -- in a sitcom with all the wit of Three's Company. Toss in Frances De La Tour and you have an embarrassment of riches or perhaps just an embarrassing waste. It would be far more satisfying to see them all in something truly worthy of their talents but it's undeniable that they...well, elevate the material? No, that's not quite right. Lower themselves to its level? Closer, but not quite. Perhaps it's just perversely amusing to see these world class talents having a go at such middle-brow fare and doing it with glee. Plus there's the frisson of seeing two men who had to be closeted for much of their careers getting to savor all the campy jokes for all to see. I for one feel almost compelled to watch.

NOTE: Prices and format are strictly based on what is made available to me for review. If they give me a DVD, that's the format and list price I include. Needless to say, every title here is often available in multiple disc formats not to mention on demand and via streaming so the list price included is virtually never what you'll pay and the format is always just one of many ways for seeing the work reviewed.

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