

DVDs this week

By Michael Giltz

Elvis: The Great Performances (\$49.99; Rhino)/ Love Me Tender/Wild in the Country/Flaming Star (\$19.98 each; Fox)

These are the films fans point to when they insist Elvis could actually act: *Love Me Tender* is a Civil War drama, *Wild in the Country* is a truly odd tale with Elvis as a literary lad burning with ambition (and a little desire for his sexy cousin - very Tennessee Williams!) and *Flaming Star* has almost no music and a half breed Indian Elvis forced to choose sides. Blame the Colonel for any squandered potential you think these films hold. But the real gem is the Rhino DVD set that focuses on E.A.P.'s real gift: music. Beautifully packaged - in genuine blue velvet - it has three DVDs bursting with Elvis performance clips. "Center Stage" shows Elvis performing live from his first appearance up to a week before his death. "The Man and His Music" delves into home movies. And the Bono-narrated "From the Waist Up" documents the year Elvis went from unknown to superstar, climaxing with that "Ed Sullivan Show" appearance. Another Rhino essential.



ELVIS!

In The Bedroom/Birthday Girl (\$29.99 each; Miramax)

Two unrelated, well-acted dramas that go off the rails in similar fashion. The more accomplished one is *In The Bedroom*, the Oscar-nominated film about a family torn apart by the sudden murder of their son. Cowritten and directed by Todd Field, it marks him as a real talent. Nick Stahl is sweet as the son, Marisa Tomei gives a career-reviving performance as the older divorcee he's romancing and Tom Wilkinson and Sissy Spacek are marvelous as Stahl's parents. Their relationships are so complex and involving, you never suspect Stahl will be violently murdered. Watching the three survivors cope with this loss is also compelling. Unfortunately, it devolves into an unconvincing revenge drama. In the same way, the low-key *Birthday Girl* begins as a simple, winning story of a geeky bank clerk (the delightful Ben Chaplin) who sends away for a mail order Russian bride. Nicole Kidman arrives and any concerns he has are dismissed when she calmly offers herself. The arrival of some of her friends is awfully disconcerting but amusingly handled. It's awkward, funny, and offbeat enough to keep our interest. Then — unfortunately — the real story begins and the Russians turn out to be criminals who blackmail Chaplin into robbing his bank and going on the lam. It's all too much.

The Cat in the Hat Beginner Book Video/Richard Scarry's Best Silly Stories and Songs (\$12.98 each; Sony)/Disney's Tarzan DVD Read-Along (\$14.98; Disney)

Next year, Mike Meyers will star in a live action version of *The Cat in the Hat*. I feel safe in saying there is no way a 90 minute live action film will equal the charm of the classic animated TV version. Now before that compels you to rush out and buy this DVD - don't! Despite the misleading packaging, this is not that animated classic. It's merely a substandard read-along version of the book. They didn't even bother to include captions so kids could read along while watching. (I guess they assume you already own the book.) Disney's *Tarzan Read-Along* is better, with on-screen captions and some good extras, like voice-over narration in five languages. It's too bad the captions remain in English instead of switching to French or Spanish. And the pacing of the narration seems far too fast for younger readers. The Richard Scarry title is just what it says, albeit with threadbare animation and so-so songs. Hey kids, you're better off reading a book!

The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring (\$29.95; New Line)

Here is a list (in no particular order) of some of the best live action fantasy films of all time. *The Wizard of Oz*. *The Thief of Baghdad*. *Time Bandits*. *Labyrinth*. *The Princess Bride*. *Conan the Barbarian*. *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad*. *Gulliver's Travels* (the 1996 TV miniseries). Oh, yes, and *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*. This is the first of several editions to come out and if you want the theatrical version (and you should), you need to buy this. A director's cut - with about 30 extra minutes - comes out in the fall. Lots of fine extras, but I was disappointed by the ten minute preview of *The Two Towers*. I expected lots of footage and maybe an extended sequence. Instead, it's basically the theatrical trailer we've already seen.