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## Michael Giltz

Freelance writer and raconteur

Posted: February 22, 2011 10:25 PM



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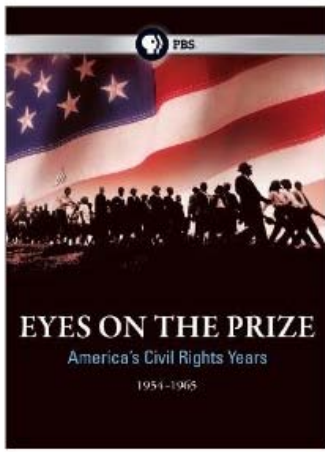
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**EYES ON THE PRIZE** (\$69.99; PBS)

**JAZZ: A FILM BY KEN BURNS** (\$99.99; PBS) -- Black History Month is useful and misleading. No remotely decent history of the US could be told without the story of slavery, racism, respect and triumph of black Americans interwoven throughout. But since it was ignored or downplayed for so long, perhaps an annual reminder isn't so bad. On the plus side, it also encourages the availability of works like *Eyes On The Prize: America's Civil Rights Years* by the late Henry Hampton. A look at the struggle for basic civil rights for black Americans from 1954-1965 seems like a slam dunk: how can you go wrong with iconic events like Rosa Parks, the bombings in Birmingham, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s campaign of non-violence and so much more? Easily. Plenty of boring dutiful essays and homework-like documentaries have been made about fascinating moments of history. Yet, even if you expect the best, you will be surprised by just how engrossing and accomplished this film is. They talk to everyone still alive, from little children caught on camera at the time to movement leaders, from racist Southern sheriffs to privileged white kids from the North who joined the Freedom Riders. It's told in six clear, lucid, absorbing hours in a manner that presents an exceptionally complex tale with ease. Everyone is seen at their best and worst, without judgment -- the infighting among competing groups like the anxious student groups that want *action* and King's people who are strategizing how best to leverage publicity into federal action. And no matter how much you think you know about the civil rights battle, it's jaw-dropping to see the waves of violence, the angry mobs hurling epithets at little children trying to go to school, the mass mobilization of national guards on one side and local and state police on the other. Anyone who thinks terrorism is some strange disease from foreign shores would do well to see the beatings, bombings, killings and cowardly acts perpetrated on a wide scale throughout the South. Above all, this is entertaining, if one can use such a light term for such a serious battle. President Woodrow Wilson once called the technically masterful but vilely racist film *Birth Of A Nation* "history written in lightning." It was more like lies written with smoke and mirrors. *Eyes On The Prize* is *real* history written in lightning and then etched in stone -- a monument to an era and a fight that does it the highest compliment of telling that story with honesty and insight.

Now I'm on to the Ken Burns documentary *Jazz*. He doesn't feel jazz in his bones the way he did with baseball, so it's not quite as masterful. As always, Burns uses the topic at hand to look at the history of America and especially race in America. It's a useful lens and whatever you think of this film's very traditional, hidebound vision of jazz (with Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington as the gods, of course), you'll find a wealth of glorious footage and great tales. It ends for the most part in the early 1960s, with a quick run-through of the 40 most recent years leading up to the film's release. You could tell the story of jazz a hundred different ways. This is just one, but it will certainly send any casual fan back to the music.



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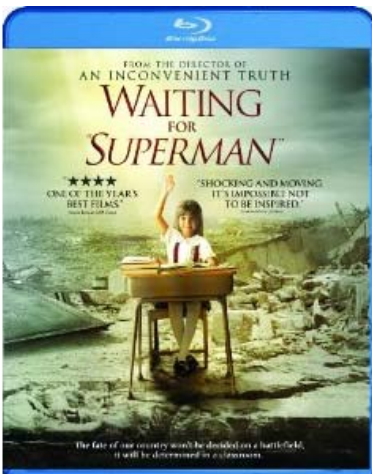
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**IT'S KIND OF A FUNNY STORY** (\$39.98 BluRay or \$29.98 regular DVD; Universal/Focus) -- Actually, it's not; it's kind of a sad story. In this case, it's the sad story of a writing/directing team -- Anna Bowden and Ryan Fleck -- who started off strong and now seem lost. They broke through with *Half Nelson*, a very conventional story about a drug-addicted school teacher enlivened mightily by an astonishing performance by Ryan Gosling. It was one of the my favorite films of the year. That was followed by *Sugar*, a more daring script about Dominican baseball players who come to the minor league system hoping to break into the big time. I'm a big baseball fan, so I was primed to love the film, which was fresh when it stuck with observing the culture shock of these often poor young men who often don't speak English and are suddenly plopped down in the middle of the heartland. Too bad it veered into Hollywood territory and had to cast actors who could also play ball, limiting their pool mightily. Still, it wasn't your average bear. Now comes *It's Kind Of A Funny Story*, which feels conventional and even anonymous on every level. A suicidally depressed teen (handsome Keir Gilchrist) checks himself into the psych ward of a hospital and must stay there for a week to be evaluated. The ward is packed with lovable eccentrics who either learn a life lesson from our hero or teach him one, especially Zach Galifianakis. Will our hero lure his bed-bound roommate out into the ward? Will he strike up a friendship/romance with the only other teen around, who is happily both female and cute (a fine Emma Roberts)? Duh. Yes, the movie acknowledges the easy allure of such a rosy view on life at the finale, but that doesn't absolve it. Gilchrist may have talent, but here he's just a pleasant presence, hardly the life force that might shake things up nor even a troubled, wounded soul that needs repairing. We are never convinced for a moment that this verbal, likable, high-achieving kid would actually harm himself. That rather undercuts the entire film, don't you think?



**WAITING FOR SUPERMAN** (\$39.99 BluRay or \$29.99 regular DVD; Paramount) -- It's pretty remarkable that a documentary film could run in theaters for three months and gross nearly \$7 million and probably just as much again on DVD. And yet, in the post-Michael Moore era, this almost seems commonplace. It's not but clearly documentary films are a genre people will happily go see in theaters and rent or buy on DVD. This one is the acclaimed look at our public school system. It focuses on charter schools as a key to the future and teacher unions as the big baddie blocking reform. Whatever the method of getting students to achieve, the one factor that seems common in every reform -- no matter how far-fetched or traditional -- is a passionate principal or leader. If you have that, anything is possible.



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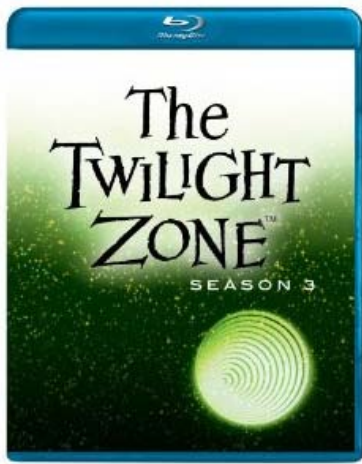
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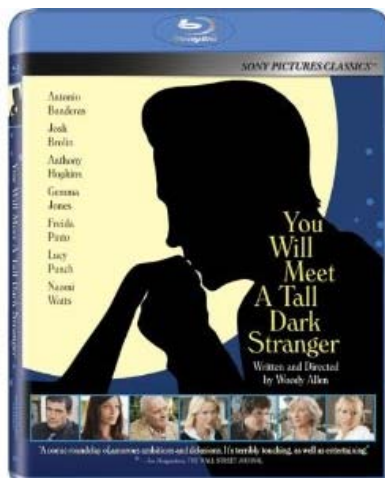
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**THE TWILIGHT ZONE SEASON THREE ON BLURAY** (\$99.98; Image) -- This is the crown jewel in the Image library and they've treated it accordingly with the care and lavish attention it deserves. The 37 half hour episodes from season three look just stunning on BluRay. Pair this BluRay with a hi-def TV and you're surely seeing and hearing it better than its ever been seen before. The guest stars are top-notch, ranging from Carol Burnett to Robert Redford to a string of minor actors given the roles of a lifetime. I always remember the episode where a neighborhood panics over a possible nuclear strike and fights each other bitterly to get into a fallout shelter. But this season also has classics like "It's A Good Life" (with a small town terrorized by a little boy) and "To Serve Man" (the one-liner of a joke about aliens who come in peace) and many more. You get the copious extras from earlier sets and a ton of new extras like 19 more audio commentary tracks, interviews and -- my favorite -- 19 radio dramas as well. This is a TV classic presented in classic form.



**YOU WILL MEET A TALL DARK STRANGER** (\$38.96 BluRay or \$28.95 regular DVD; Sony) -- Is it worth seeing? No. At this stage, as mediocre film follows mediocre film and the bad outnumber the good and threaten his reputation (which deserves to remain high, no matter how many bad films he makes), I think most fans just want to know if seeing the new Woody Allen movie will diminish him in their eyes just a tad more or keep his integrity undimmed. This comedy is too innocuous to tip the scales either way, but if it isn't a net positive like *Match Point*, why bother? Why cloud your memory of *Annie Hall* and *Manhattan* and *Husbands & Wives* and *Hannah And Her Sisters* and *The Purple Rose Of Cairo* and his other great works from the 70s and 80s with more of the same, only less? *Tall Dark Stranger* certainly won't surprise you in the least. Josh Brolin and Naomi Watts are an unhappily married couple; he's a frustrated novelist (one success, multiple failures) who has a wandering eye; she's an assistant in an art gallery whose sexy new boss (Antonio Banderas) isn't being nearly forward enough. Anthony Hopkins is her dad, saddling himself with a dim-witted prostitute turned girlfriend. (At least this time the old man with the young gal looks foolish.) And her mom is the redoubtable Gemma Jones, who comes off best as a woman sideswiped by her husband's abandonment but consoled by a fake psychic (is that redundant?) who promises her that she's in a glow of triumph and all will work out well. Everyone does their job, a few moments sparkle (a little) and Freida Pinto (of *Slumdog Millionaire*) as Brolin's quite reasonable obsession is ready for a great Hollywood role. But it's telling that a director so identified with one city doesn't even begin to capture London here. Clearly, shooting overseas woke Allen up out of



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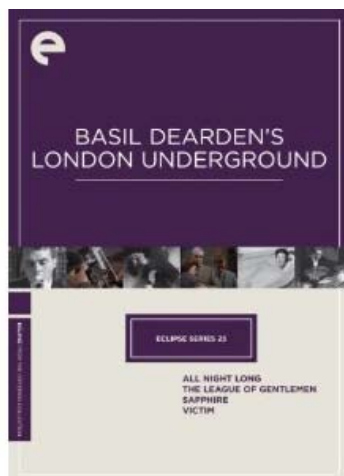
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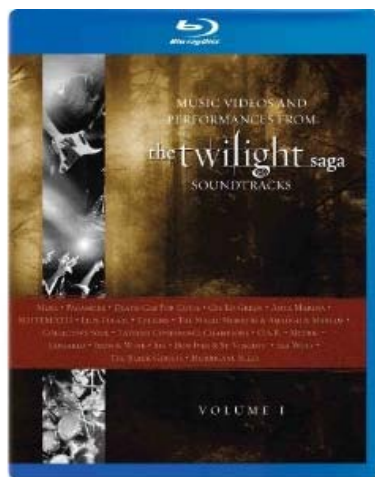
Mexico

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his 90s stupor. But this film could be set in any major city without making the slightest difference and the characters are equally cardboard. London should not feel like Barcelona or New York. It should feel like London. So I don't come to bury Allen or to praise him but to shrug my shoulders and wish again that Woody would stop making movies out of habit and start making them only when he feels truly inspired. He certainly wasn't this time.

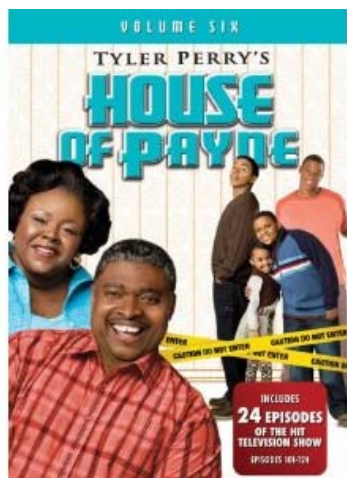
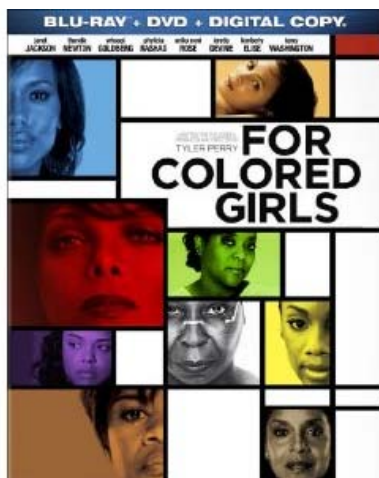


**BASIL DEARDEN'S LONDON UNDERGROUND** (\$59.95; Eclipse) -- Criterion's no-frills line Eclipse continues to be a source of unexpected pleasures. This boxed set reveals director Basil Dearden as a savvy examiner of London's overlooked. *Sapphire* from 1959 was the real find for me. A young woman's murder turns into a fascinating glimpse of blacks in the UK when she turns out to have been a light-skinned black woman who chose to "pass" for white. The investigator's sidekick proves racist in an interestingly low-key manner while the rich and poor black people of London are seen in all their diversity and range, from thugs to the privileged, from those who disdained *Sapphire's* desire to pass to those who won't condemn her. It's not a great film, but it's an intriguing one made with polish. *The League Of Gentlemen* from 1960 wasn't nearly as fun as I hoped. It shows down on their (and sometimes just plain shady) veterans of World War II brought together for an elaborate bank job, using their skills from the military to pull it off. A bit larky but not larky enough, I'm afraid, though again Dearden drops in some great tidbits, like the casual approach to a gay member of the team. *Victim* is one of Dearden's most famous films, of course, with Dirk Bogarde as a closeted gay lawyer risking everything to take on a blackmailer who preys on the gay community. Very few films are made with such a social purpose in mind (this movies specifically hoped to overturn laws banning homosexuality). Almost none of them are actually good. This one is. Finally, there's *All Night Long* from 1962. I haven't watched it yet, but a modern retelling of Othello set in a London nightclub featuring Charles Mingus and Dave Brubeck? Count me in.



**THE TWILIGHT SAGA SOUNDTREACKS VOLUME 1** (\$34.99 BluRay or \$26.99 regular DVD; Summit) -- The *Twilight* movies have been pretty awful. In marked contrast, their soundtracks and use of pop music have been excellent, providing a great cross-section of terrific current acts. This DVD is to my knowledge unique -- a collection of videos and live performances by the artists on the first three films. Has any other movie series done this before? It's only Volume One because of course there are two more soundtracks to come and numerous songs didn't make the cut. Personal favorites here include The Magic

Numbers with Amadou & Mariam on "All I Believe In" and Muse's "Neutron Star Collision (Love Is Forever)" and Bon Iver and St. Vincent's "Roslyn." I'm not quite sure why the footage from the movies used in some of the videos is blurred out. That keeps this from being ideal for those who love the movies and the music. But otherwise this is a very good collection of tunes. Bonus features include two classical pieces used in the movie by Debussy and Verdi.



**FOR COLORED GIRLS** (\$39.99 BluRay or \$29.95 regular DVD; Lionsgate)

**TYLER PERRY'S HOUSE OF PAYNE VOLUME SIX** (\$29.98; Lionsgate) -- *For Colored Girls* was probably doomed from the start. The landmark stage show is a plotless work by Ntozake Shange called a "choreo-poem." Clearly, we're not in standard play territory and what makes it special in the theater is the very theatricality that makes it unsuited for film. Tyler Perry bravely hangs a thin tale on it and brings together a stellar cast including Thandie Newton, Whoopi Goldberg, Anika Noni Rose, Loretta Devine, Janet Jackson and more. All to little avail. It's a shame there's no audio commentary; it would be nice to hear Perry talking about this passion project that probably only he could get to make as a feature. Far more middle of the road is the latest set of 24 episodes from the bland sitcom *House Of Payne*. It remains more fascinating for the making and marketing than the show itself. After a wildly successful ten episode trial run, the cable channel TBS ordered 100 episodes up front, immediately establishing it as a show that would reach enough episodes to fruitfully syndicate it. This set goes up to episode 124 and there are two more seasons to go. Amazing.

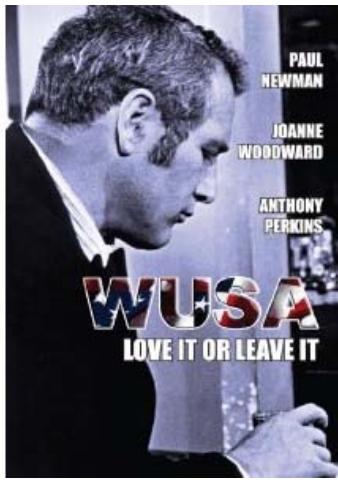


**BAD DAY TO GO FISHING** (\$24.95; Film Movement) -- The DVD of the Month Club series by Film Movement is the best way to find undiscovered gems that I know. Heck, I go to film festivals around the world and they still deliver stuff I haven't heard of and find enjoyable. Last year, one of my favorite films was *Alamar*, a movie I discovered thanks to Film Movement. I'm sure 2011 will be no exception. Up this month is a ramshackle comedy set in Uruguay about a strong-man who takes on all challengers in staged wrestling matches held in tiny village after tiny village. I can't wait to check it out.

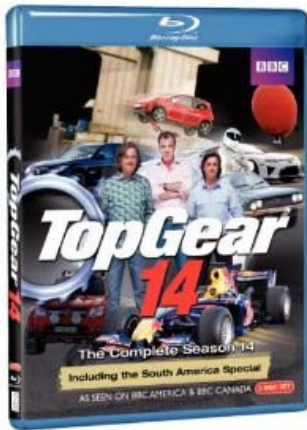


**YOU AGAIN** (\$39.99 BluRay or \$29.99 regular DVD; Touchstone)

**LIFE AS WE KNOW IT** (\$35.99 BluRay or \$29.98 regular DVD; Warner Bros.) -- Betty White isn't perfect. We know that now. But can we really blame her for saying yes to anything and everything in the twilight of her career? No, of course not. But hopefully she has some good advice for Kristen Bell and Josh Duhamel. They are the respective stars of these two thoroughly bland comedies. Bell and Duhamel (which sounds like a law firm) add sparkle and zest, to a degree. But how many shots are they going to get at becoming stars before audiences move on? Please, someone, help them find some good scripts. Betty, got any recommendations for building a 70 year career?



**WUSA** (\$24.95; Olive/Paramount) -- The specialty label Olive continues to plumb the Paramount catalog with interesting results. Paul Newman stars in this 1970 drama about a shock jock who joins a conservative lineup on a station in New Orleans, spewing out hate with the best of them. The fiction comes in when he feels guilty about it, rather than laughing all the way to the bank. The excellent supporting cast includes Cloris Leachman, Moses Gunn and Laurence Harvey and it's directed by Stuart Rosenberg, the guy behind one of Newman's best -- *Cool Hand Luke*.

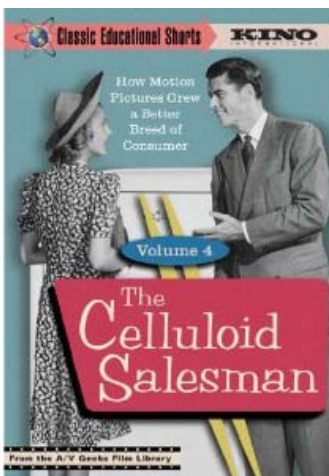
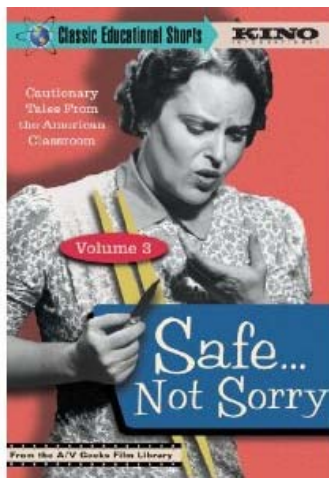


**TOP GEAR SEASONS 14 AND 15** (\$24.99 each on BluRay; BBC) - This highly entertaining series about all things vehicular is wildly popular in the UK but hasn't caught on in the US yet. It should. I don't give a toss for horsepower and can't tell the difference between a Camaro and a Camry, but the combination of celebrities, silly stunts like driving a Toyota pickup in an active volcano and the like is diverting fun. The recent brouhaha over an obnoxious series of jokes about Mexican cars wasn't funny and should have been condemned instead of defended by the BBC, but it was quite atypical. (And the US cable channel BBC America was right to edit it out.) Buy it for the gearhead in your life and be surprised

at how much you enjoy watching it with them.



**AMERICA AMERICA** (\$19.98; Warner Bros.) -- The recent elaborate boxed set for director Elia Kazan was well deserved. I didn't get to check it out, but then the only DVD I really wanted/needed was this one. It's a 2 hour and 48 minute intimate epic about immigrants coming to America and making a new life for themselves. It deserves pride of place alongside his better known classics but has been overshadowed and forgotten in comparison to *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *On The Waterfront*, *A Face In The Crowd*, *A Tree Grows In Brooklyn*, *East Of Eden* and more. Just listing those movies reminds you what a crowded resume Kazan has, but this Oscar nominee for Best Picture really does deserve your attention. Snap it up.



**CLASSIC EDUCATIONAL SHORTS: SAFE NOT SORRY AND THE CELLULOID SALESMAN** (\$19.95 each; Kino) -- Nope, they never get old. Pee-wee Herman uses old educational shorts (the sort they'd show to students in the Fifties and Sixties when teachers wanted an easy break). They still make audiences laugh. These two sets are chock full of silliness like "Dangerous Stranger," "Safety: Harm Hides

At Home," and product placements posing as news features like "Freeze-In" and "Goodbye Weeds." Best of all, since you're not in class if you're bored by one you can always fast forward or skip to the next.

Thanks for reading. Michael Giltz is the cohost of Showbiz Sandbox, a weekly pop culture podcast that reveals the industry take on entertainment news of the day and features top journalists and opinion makers as guests. It's available free on iTunes. Visit Michael Giltz at his website and his daily blog. Download his podcast of celebrity interviews and his radio show, also called Popsurfing and also available for free on iTunes. Link to him on Netflix and gain access to thousands of ratings and reviews.

NOTE: Michael Giltz is provided with free copies of DVDs to consider for review. He typically does not guarantee coverage and invariably receives far more screeners and DVDs than he can cover each week. Also, Michael Giltz freelances as a writer of DVD copy (the text that appears on the back of DVDs) for some titles released by IFC and other subsidiaries of MPI. It helps pay the rent, but does not obligate him in any way to speak positively or negatively of their titles.

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