

TV Sunday

Bought any good TV shows lately?

DVD sales turn old classics into money makers

By MICHAEL GILTZ

DVDs are tearing up the home entertainment market, banishing VHS tapes to a smaller and smaller section of Blockbuster, Tower and other stores that rent and sell movies. But the surprise is the category of programming that's getting bigger and bigger.

DVD is turning TV shows — an afterthought on VHS — into one of the hottest collectibles around. Top-grossing movies like "Shrek" and boxed sets like "The Godfather Collection" are selling like gangbusters. But hit TV shows like "The Sopranos" are proving just as hot.

"The Sopranos' second season has sold phenomenally well," says John Thrasher, vice president of video sales for Tower. "I was a bit worried that 'The Godfather' boxed set was going to cannibalize some of 'The Sopranos' sales, but it hasn't happened."

"Other TV shows proving to be hits on DVD include "The X-Files Season Four," "Sex and the City: Season Two," "The Simpsons First Season," "Fawlty Towers, The Complete Series," Disney's "Davy Crockett" and a massive boxed set featuring every luscious episode of Emma Peel on "The Avengers."

Coming out in the next few weeks are a flood of TV titles on DVD: new hit shows like "Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The First Season" and the American version of "Queer as Folk," cult favorites like "Twin Peaks: The First Season," the landmark miniseries "Roots" and British favorites like "The Saint" and "Upstairs, Downstairs: The Complete Second Season." And the first season of a '70s sitcom you've seen a million times

but will want to own anyway: "M*A*S*H."

Compared to the old days of VHS tape — when a tiny corner of a video store would have some dusty copies of "Star Trek" and "The Twilight Zone" — DVD is turning old TV shows into a new moneymaker.

"TV on DVD is already a bigger category than it was on VHS," says John Staddon, senior vice president of marketing at Fox Home Entertainment. That's especially striking since there are still a lot more VCRs in homes than there are DVD players. "If you look at the revenue we're doing now (on sales of TV shows) versus the amount of revenue we were doing on VHS a year ago or 18 months ago, there's no comparison."

Why? Lots of reasons: DVDs are of much better quality, take up a lot less space, often include extras like director commentary, and — perhaps most importantly — DVD sets tend to include entire seasons rather than a random collection

of episodes.

If people want to watch random episodes of their favorite shows, they can turn on the TV and start surfing. If they want to enjoy a classic series from the beginning, DVD is the only place to do it.

Kate Winn, the director of A&E Home Video has seen her company change in the last three years from a division focused solely on programming from A&E like "Horatio Hornblower" into a successful purveyor of classic, mostly British series like "The Prisoner," "Secret Agent," and the delightful puppet action show "Thunderbirds." Certainly, DVD has been the engine driving that change.

"Particularly for the cult TV series, they sell a lot better on DVD than they did on VHS," says Winn, who is excited about their March release of "Peter Gunn."

"We think that speaks a lot to the col-

lectible nature of TV series," she says. "Collectors want to have it all. They want every episode."

Rhino Records — which revolutionized CD boxed sets and has proven time and again that obscure product cleverly packaged will find an audience — is also proving just as nimble on DVD. Its gift for uncovering cult favorites seems tailor-made for a genre where most TV shows only run for a season or two and then disappear.

Rhino is working on boxed sets for "The Monkees," "Gumby," "The Lone Ranger," and enjoying success with "H.R. Pufnstuf," Chris Elliott's "Get a Life," and even the classic train-wreck of a variety show, "Pink Lady and Jeff."

According to Arny Schorr, senior vice president of Rhino Home Video, there's no question TV shows are proving much more popular on DVD than VHS.

"There's the quality factor," says Schorr. "You can create special features and you get a lot more for the money. On VHS

you get one or two episodes. On DVD, you can get four to six."

"Besides, DVD is a much more friendly format than VHS. You couldn't go to your favorite scenes on tape. If you're watching a Flip Wilson disc, you can jump to a scene where he's playing Geraldine. If you're watching 'H.R. Pufnstuf,' you can jump to the scenes with Witchespeep. You have that flexibility."

What doesn't work so well on DVD are collections that simply mimic VHS or don't take advantage of the extra capacity DVD has to offer.

"Star Trek" and "The Twilight Zone" —

two of the few profitable series on VHS —

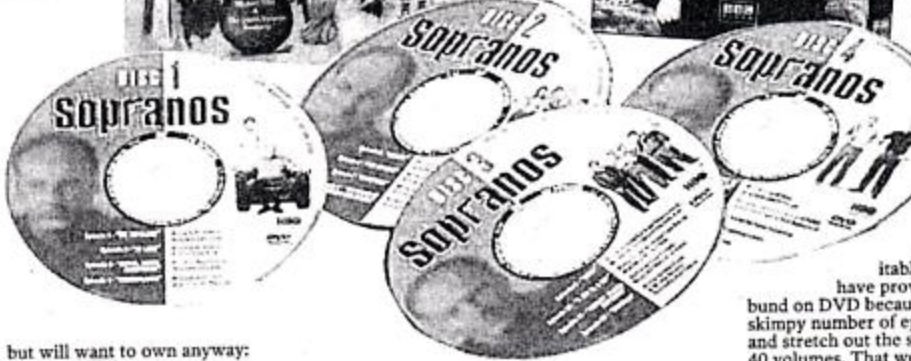
have proven relatively moribund on DVD because they offer a skimpy number of episodes on each disc and stretch out the shows onto more than 40 volumes. That would mean paying about \$800 to get the entire series — a staggering sum even for hardcore fans.

But clearly, the future of TV on DVD is bright — as long as the shows are well-packaged, offer complete runs of the show or at least complete seasons, and are reasonably priced. "Classic TV shows like 'Mary Tyler Moore' and 'All in the Family' have been available on tape," says Thrasher, "but they were never really marketed effectively."

"The problem is all VHS tapes for a season just takes up a ton of space. On DVD, three or four discs for a full season at an affordable price makes it collectible."

That's what Fox — which sold twice as many sets of "The Simpsons" than it expected — is hoping for with "M*A*S*H."

"It's the first show we've put out that isn't contemporary," says Fox's Staddon. "Obviously, when you look at the size of the audience, it's a huge title for us. We're really interested to see how it will do."



DVDs are better quality than videos, take up less space and tend to include entire seasons rather than a few episodes.