

TV Monday

Buy your own

But watch out for sky-high prices when purchasing TV shows on disc or DVD

By MICHAEL GILTZ

BUGHT any good TV shows lately?

People are used to the idea of buying a hit movie when it comes out on video. And everyone probably owns some books by their favorite author, or CDs by their favorite musician.

Now — if Hollywood has its way — people will start collecting their favorite sitcoms and dramas on DVD.

That's nothing new overseas. Go to any video store in England and you'll find shelves crammed with local hits like "The Royle Family" and imports like "Friends."

In Europe, people expect to find almost any new show available to rent or buy as soon as its first season is over.

In the U.S., collecting every episode of a TV series has been left mostly to sci-fi buffs desperate for "Star Trek" or "Battlestar Galactica."

Now that's changing.

This holiday season, there's a tidal wave of new releases swimming with TV shows — everything from classic episodes of "Friends" to complete seasons of "The X-Files" and "The Sopranos."

But just because a series is one of your favorites doesn't mean the DVD is a good one to buy.

Just out is "The Sopranos" (\$100; HBO Home Video) and, happily, it's a pretty good example of doing it right.

You get the complete first season — 13 episodes — on four discs, with some extras thrown in. Sure, it's expensive, but who'll try to bargain with a made man?

Tony's suffocating mom, Livia, was named after

one of the ferocious women in "I Claudius" (\$90; Image), one of the greatest miniseries ever shown on "Masterpiece Theatre." There's enough treachery and backstabbing in this five-disc, 13-part Derek Jacobi melodrama to make the Sopranos seem like pussycats.

It, too, is a great show — unfortunately, it's no bargain.

One miniseries that truly gets it right is "Lonesome Dove" (\$30; Artisan). This may be one of the most popular series ever made and, thankfully, they decided to squeeze all six hours onto one disc.

Compare that to Ken Burns' "Baseball" (\$180; Image). It's another TV classic, but this 18-hour documentary is stretched out over 10 discs and comes packaged in a bulky manner, creating a doorstop of a boxed set that's out of the price range of almost everyone except libraries and schools.

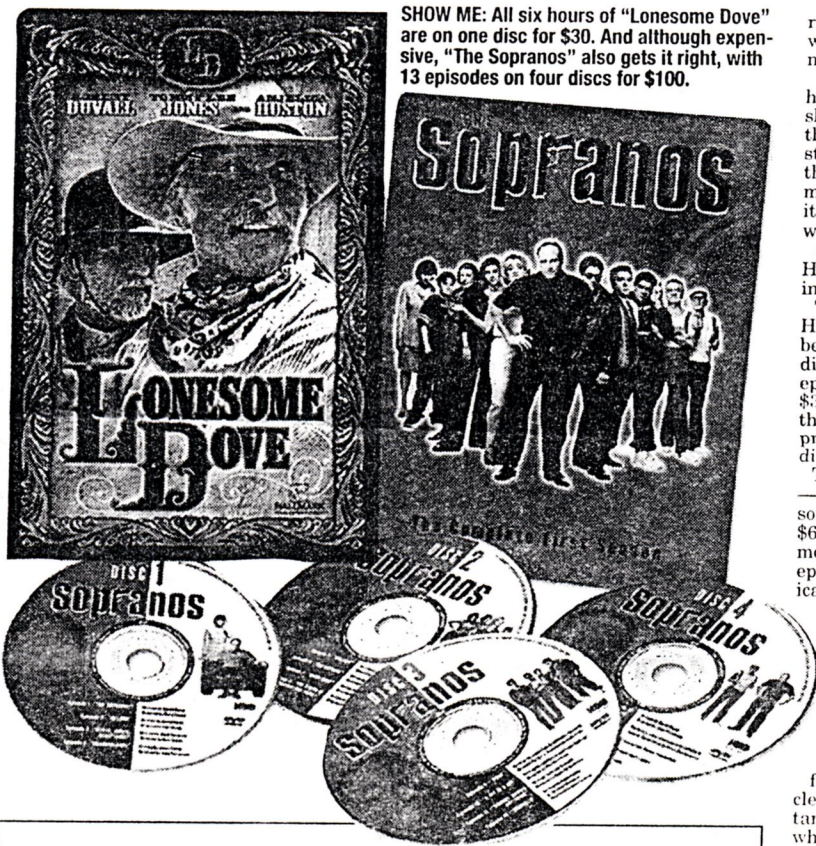
Almost as expensive is "The X-Files — The Complete Second Season." At \$150 from Fox Home Video, it's even more expensive than the most elaborate jazz or classical boxed sets on CD, and it costs more than virtually any coffee table book you can find.

True, like "The Sopranos," "X-Files" comes in a compact, attractive box, and it does offer a good amount of episodes per disc — 25 shows on 7 discs. Someone who buys it on sale should be able to find it for around \$100.

But if you plan to buy every season when they come out, that'll cost you \$700 (and counting).

Still, it's a bargain compared to "Star Trek" (\$25

SHOW ME: All six hours of "Lonesome Dove" are on one disc for \$30. And although expensive, "The Sopranos" also gets it right, with 13 episodes on four discs for \$100.



ries), and you'll have to wait till spring for the next batch.

They could just as easily have released the whole show all at once on a three-disc set for \$60. Instead, they've stretched the release over six months (if not longer), and it will probably cost \$240 when all is said and done.

So who gets it right? Happily, those unassuming kids on "Friends."

Tomorrow, Warner Home Video releases a best-of compilation, a two-disc set with a healthy five episodes per disc for just \$35. Highlights include the pilot episode, Phoebe's pregnancy and Ross' wedding.

They can — and should — release each entire season on two discs for, say, \$60, but this is by far the most generous release of episodes for a major American sitcom.

An even better value is the twisted British series "The League of Gentlemen — The Complete Series 1" (\$30; BBC Video). Shown on Comedy Central, you get all six episodes from the first season, along with clever extras and commentary from the four lads who star.

Perhaps the best comedy value of all is one you can pretend to buy for your kids — "The Powerpuff Girls" (\$20 each; Warner Home Video). This witty series is compiled on two separate discs, with five episodes per disc and a bonus episode from another Cartoon Network show.

Apparently the people of Townsville are smart shoppers and demand a good bargain.

You won't get any double talk from "Sherlock Holmes." The definitive British TV series starring Jeremy Brett comes to DVD in a faultless collection (\$20; MPI Home Video).

Four episodes on one disc at a bargain price? It seems elementary.

Here's hoping everyone else gets clued in and follows the example of the great detective.

How to spot a bargain

DVDS can hold up to six hours on a single disc. That means six episodes of a drama like "Hill Street Blues" or 12 episodes of a sitcom like "M*A*S*H" can fit on one disc.

Most prime-time shows since the '70s create about 22 episodes a year — so an entire season of "Mary Tyler Moore" can fit on two discs; a year of

"St. Elsewhere" should take up four.

But no one offers that much bang for your buck. So here's a good rule of thumb: any long-running drama should offer at least three episodes per disc, and sitcoms should offer at least four.

Any less and it's an offer you should refuse.

out of the reach of all but the most fanatical collector.

Even worse is "The Prisoner" (\$40 per two-disc set; A&E Home Video). One of the best series of all time, this 17-part British sci-fi series about paranoia and identity has been bungled for DVD.

Almost no critic had any-

each; Image). They've stretched out this classic series by including a measly two episodes on each DVD. That's why store shelves are bulging with 40 volumes of the show. Buy them all and you'll have spent a shocking \$1,000.

"The Twilight Zone" has been similarly bungled, placing these shows

thing bad to say about this release, showing how divorced from reality you can become when you don't have to pay for the stuff you're reviewing.

The mistakes? A&E included just three episodes on each two-disc set, they've only released the first six episodes (as if anyone would want to watch a third of a minise-