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Category: Home > Reviews > Comedy > Satire > Fashion > BritCom > Soap Opera > Show Business > Mumblecore > Relationships > Teens > Gang > Absolutely Fabulous: Absolutely Everything (1992 – 2004/BBC DVD Box Set)/Dr. Willoughby (1999/Acorn Media DVD)/The Future (2011/Lionsgate DVD)/The Hollywood Knights (1980/Image Blu-ray)/Portlandia: Se

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Absolutely Fabulous: Absolutely Everything (1992 – 2004/BBC DVD Box Set)/Dr. Willoughby (1999/Acorn Media DVD)/The Future (2011/Lionsgate DVD)/The Hollywood Knights (1980/Image Blu-ray)/Portlandia: Season One (2011/IFC/VSC/MVD Blu-ray w/DVD)

Picture: C+/C+/C/B/B- & C
 Sound: C+ (**Knights**: B-)
 Extras: B/D/C/C-/C+ Main Programs: B/B-/C/B-/B-

It is nice to see comedy done well and here are examples that usually succeed.

A massive hit, **Absolutely Fabulous: Absolutely Everything** (1992 – 2004) is the ever bold, hilarious, gutsy BritCom about two women (co-creator Jennifer Saunders and ever-successful Joanna Lumley) in the fashion industry who are just a bit older than the young up and comers, but surviving no matter how drunk or irresponsible they tend to be. Edina (Saunders) lives with her nerdy daughter Saffron (Julia Sawalha) who lands up being the adult and blames Patsy (Lumley) as much for her mothers cannot-grow-up escapades as her own mother.

The writing is top notch and among the usually strong work by Saunders and comedy partner Dawn French, making fun of pop culture, sexuality, fashion, excess, glitz, gaudiness, wealth, snobs, class division, Britishisms, aging and womanhood among its targets and the show never holds back. This is so much so that all U.S. attempts to remake it have fallen through for being too racy. Saunders is brilliant, but I want to take a moment to focus on what Lumley does here that people miss.

Starting as one of the last of the sexy Brit models of the 1960s, she was a Bond girl in **On Her Majesty's Secret Service** (1969), became entertainment royalty by her involvement with a top male comedy writer in the early 1970s, was a choice pick for supporting roles, then broke through internationally as Purdey in the mid-1970s spy revival **The New Avengers** which had her against high odds continuing the legacy of her predecessors (Honor Blackman, Diana Rigg, Linda Thorson) that the original classic established. She even took risks with challenging series like the short-lived **Sapphire & Steel** with David McCallum. After all that, she could have just taken on small roles, done more of the same or even retired, but by playing the ever-drunk and sarcastic Patsy, she boldly played against her entire legacy trashing it for humor to some



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 Edition/BBC DVD)

extent in a role that could have backfired. Instead, she proved again her comic credentials and what a great actress she really is. Along with Saunders, the resulting chemistry was stunning and that is why this became a big hit worldwide and a cult hit in the U.S., going places post-feminism and British comedy had not found since **Monty Python** or **The Young Ones**.



There are also even inside jokes on entertainment royalty in the U.K. down to appearances by the likes of Lulu, Kate O'Mara, Twiggy and Miranda Richardson, but this is far from a series with nothing but in-jokes. It breaks the sitcom rule (especially prominent in the U.S.) that you cannot have negative or outrageous characters as the star(s) of your sitcom. All 38 episodes (amounting to six seasons) are here on 9 DVDs in a plush pearl white book case with many extras including the pilot episode Mirror Ball, Photo Galleries, the modern mother & daughter sketch that started the show off, four featurettes: *Joanna Lumley on Modeling*, *How To Be Absolutely Fabulous*, *Absolutely Fabulous – A Life & Before Ab Fab* (two sketches) and audio commentary by Saunders and Executive Producer Jon Plowman on select episodes. This is a great set and the definitive one to get for fans, plus it makes a great gift.

Lumley became part of the French/Saunders comedy troop, but all have continued to do edgy comedy since their hit ended. While Saunders appeared in the underrated **Life & Times Of Vivienne Vyle** (2007, reviewed elsewhere on this site) lampooning the culture of talk shows, Lumley played the title character and the actress who is a star because of it in **Dr. Willoughby** (1999), an equally cynical look at TV stardom and the banality of soap operas, which is ironically now in decline. As star Donna Sinclair, she is nice in your face, but mean, bitter, vengeful and bitchy off-screen unknown to her fans. Brian Protheroe is the aging male lead who fears he'll get kicked off the show and Isobel Middleton plays Emma, a rising star playing a "wonderful, sympathetic" nun annoying Donna to no end. The show also has an upset producer, a pair of bad writers and other staff acting wacky.

Running 6 episodes, this is often amusing and Lumley's timing is great, but the shows are not as consistent in keeping the characters on the same track (some only show up for one show, leaving them undeveloped) and this can come up short, yet now it is also a time capsule since daytime soaps are in decline on both sides of the Atlantic. Also, classics like **Soap** and **Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman** (both reviewed elsewhere on this site) took apart the form decades ago. Still, I think there are enough laughs here to catch it and anyone interested will enjoy it. There are sadly no extras.

Miranda July directs, writes and stars in **The Future** (2011) a mumblecore comedy with some potential, but it quickly gets distracted by performance art (read the kind of dancing Spike Jonze made fun of in his great video for Fatboy Slims' *Praise You*) and a talking cat who occasionally breaks the narrative that is here. She plays Sophie and is dating Jason (Hamish Linklater perfectly cast as her mate) when they decide to take in a cat who is ill, but they have to wait another month for the animal to get well before bringing it home. Then they realize it will end their freedom as a couple, so they intend to do what they can do to live it up until then.

The scenario definitely has potential and both are naturals for comedy, but all get distracted very quickly and what could have been a howler of a surprise quietly and slowly falls off with self-indulgence and then everything we have seen in tired indie mumblecore releases to date. You may smile sometimes, but the 91 minutes just become longer and longer until you are glad to see it end. Extras include a Trailer, Deleted Scene, *Making The Future* behind-the-scenes featurette and feature length audio commentary by July.

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Floyd Mutrux's **The Hollywood Knights** (1980) is one of those films that has not been remembered as it should be, but is a surprisingly funny teen comedy that wants to be part **American Graffiti**, part **Animal House** and part counterculture comedy taking place in 1965 with some gross comedy moments, some outright funny moments and is yet another one of those films that helped launch several careers as we see Michelle Pfeiffer (with an almost Farrah Fawcett haircut), Robert Wuhl, Fran Drescher and Tony Danza among the familiar faces in this tale of the title gang having one last romp on Halloween before a favorite food hangout closes and they start to go their separate ways.

The script is stronger and more naturalistic (you believe the events and their flow) than so many films that followed like it, especially in the use of licensed music when it was much less common. When the songs show up, they are part of the story, never seems forced and totally make sense in every single case, making it one of the best films to use hit songs still to this day. That has become a major, tired spoof of itself these days, but here, the music enhances the narrative and its period authenticity. Though not a classic, it is a remarkable film in its low budget and that it has more energy than even I remembered. Definitely worth revisiting, its arrival on Blu-ray is more pleasant than expected. There are no extras, but this film ought to have a few.

Finally we have **Portlandia: Season One** (2011), the first thing Lorne Michaels has been part of that was even amusing for the first time in many years. This sometimes surreal show has Fred Armisen and Carrie Brownstein playing multiple characters in a Portland, Oregon that is still somehow stuck in the progressive side of the 1990s. There are some chuckles, a few laughs and more than a few clichés that wear thin (along with their characters) quickly, reminding me of Tracey Ullman doing multiple characters, but with a little less success.

This season offers six episodes and it is the kind of show that might at least become a cult item. Some skits set-ups work nicely and they have the feel of the area, though no witty jokes on past uses of the city in pop culture like referencing the McLean Stevenson bomb **Hello Larry**, the ill-fated **Diff'rent Strokes** spin-off. You'll remember grunge though and expect some clever surprises. Extras include audio commentary on all episodes, Deleted Scenes, Bloopers Reel, Thunderant Videos, **Season Two** Preview, Armisen speaking to OES Graduates and Extended Scenes.

The 1.33 X 1 image on the first three seasons of **Absolutely** is shot on PAL analog videotape (the last big international BBC hit to be produced as such) with 16mm outdoor footage and may have some flaws and aliasing errors, but color and definition are otherwise as about as consistent as can be expected. The remaining shows that followed are anamorphically enhanced at 1.78 X 1 and have some slight improvements, but not by much. Still, this looks just fine and is enjoyable down to the amusingly keyed-up color.

The anamorphically enhanced 1.78 X 1 image on **Willoughby** is on par with that shot on early HD video and having some good, consistent color, but still on the soft side in more than a few shots. The anamorphically enhanced 1.78 X 1 image on **Future** is softer than either of them, which is odd considering it was meant for theatrical release including weak Video Black and a general softness throughout.

The 1080p 1.85 X 1 digital High Definition image transfer on **Knights** may be the oldest entry on the list, but is a newer HD master and is surprisingly clean, clear and colorful, even with some of its stylized approach (they did not overdo these things then) and the fact it was shot on 16mm film. Fans of the film will be surprised and it is at least as good as the Blu-ray Universal just issued on **American Graffiti**, which in fairness was shot in grainier Techniscope (despite some prints being produced in dye-transfer, three-strip Technicolor).

The 1080p 1.78 1 digital High Definition image on the Blu-ray for **Portlandia** is the second best looking performer on the list, though it also has its share of softness and even slight motion blur. Colors are usually on the subtle side. An anamorphically enhanced DVD version is also included, but ties **Future** as the poorest performer on the list.

The DTS-HD MA (Master Audio) 5.1 lossless mix on **Knights** is easily the best-sounding of the releases here, clean and clear for its age and the best upgrade you could expect from an older low-budget film. The music never sounds phony or like some brand-new transfer of the hits from master tapes or discs, which is nice. The rest of the entries offer lossy Dolby Digital 2.0 Stereo, though **Future** has Dolby 5.1, but that offers it no sonic boost from a quiet dialogue-based mumblecore indie.

- Nicholas Sheffo

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