

Great New DVD Box Sets: Blasts From The Past And 'Breaking Bad'

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Here's a short list of some of the most exciting recent TV offerings on DVD. These are sets you can still order and receive in time for the holidays — and regardless, they're perfect to dive into over the vacation period, enjoying an episode or two a night.

The best — and biggest, and most recent — of the bunch is *Breaking Bad: The Complete Series*. Vince Gilligan's AMC drama, starring Bryan Cranston as a high school teacher turned criminal mastermind, arguably is the best TV series ever made — so getting or giving it in one gulp is about as good as it gets. Especially with Sony Picture Television's mammoth set providing so many extras, including a documentary on the final season which, among other things, allows us to peek in as Cranston hosts his co-star, Aaron Paul, and the two of them read the show's final script for the first time.

The other box sets I'm most excited about this year are all of a much older vintage. Some of them are released on home video for the first time and — to those of a certain age — will bring back lots of treasured TV memories. One of them is a series from Norman Lear, producer of *All in the Family*, who wanted to satirize the TV soap opera by presenting his own nightly version. When the networks said no, Lear offered it to local stations in a new model of first-run syndication, and in 1976, the show was born — starring Louise Lasser as a fictional housewife from Fernwood, Ohio.



Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman takes awhile to get going, and, like a lot of Norman Lear



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comedies, holds up well in some episodes and seems horribly dated in others. But the cast that came to prominence is so much fun to watch that it's a pleasure to see them again. Dabney Coleman and Mary Kay Place broke out in this show — and so did Martin Mull, playing two roles. After one character, Garth Gimble, was impaled to death by a Christmas tree, Mull returned as twin brother Barth Gimble, who hosted the local TV talk show *Fernwood 2-Night*. With sidekick Jerry Hubbard, played by Fred Willard, *Fernwood 2-Night* became a spinoff series — 10 episodes of which are included in Shout Factory's *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman: The Complete Series*.

Another TV treat from the '70s is Time Life's new collection of *The Dean Martin Celebrity Roasts*, which began during the final season of Martin's NBC variety series in 1973, and continued for another 11 years. Most were taped in Las Vegas, at the MGM Grand, where the alcohol flowed as freely as the insults. Today's TV viewers are familiar with the roast format because of Comedy Central's recent efforts — but each one of these Dean Martin specials is an almost ridiculously deep cross-section of pop culture of its era. You don't need to hear any jokes from the 1976 roast where Dean Martin himself is the guest of honor — all you need is the list of celebrity participants during the opening credits.

These specials are so much fun because they move so quickly, and feature so many stars. And because they're from an era when NBC erased most of its Johnny Carson *Tonight* shows, they're a valuable addition to the old-fashioned showbiz canon.



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An even earlier, and even more rare, television treat is the new MDV Entertainment boxed set called *Here's Edie: The Edie Adams Television Collection*. It features the widow of Ernie Kovacs, in shows from her 1962-64 ABC variety series, which was televised just after her husband's death. It presents all 21 episodes, including all of her Muriel cigar commercials intact — and it's the first time these programs have been seen anywhere since their original broadcast. Watching them for the first time, I was astounded by how inventive and original they are — Edie really did carry on the

pioneering TV spirit of Ernie Kovacs. But where he liked his music with a touch of the bizarre, she was a trained classical and jazz singer, and her TV shows reflect her tastes beautifully. There's no pandering to a network TV audience here: In one show, her guests include Count Basie and his Orchestra, and Jon Hendricks from the jazz vocal trio of Lambert, Hendricks and Ross. Hendricks sings one of his group's numbers with Edie and guest Don Chastain as Basie's orchestra provides the backing.

And finally, there's a deluxe Blu-ray reissue, by Video Services, called *The Rutles: Anthology*. It's all built around the Rutles, Eric Idle's spoof of The Beatles, and has lots of new extras and bonus snippets. But for me, nothing is as good as, or could be better than, the set's centerpiece: The 1978 faux rock documentary *All You Need Is Cash*, telling the story of the fabulous Rutles. If you like *Spinal Tap*, you'll love The Rutles — and they got there first, using lots of original *Saturday Night Live* cast members as supporting players. For the holidays, if only for yourself, I can't think of a better gift. Not when you can enjoy such almost hits as the title song of "Ouch," The Rutles' answer to the Beatles' "Help." Who needs to sing carols, when you can sing along with The Rutles?