

GIANT

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DVD Round-Up: October 28, 2008

By [Ethan Alter](#), Editor Oct 28, 2008



This week, take a trip to the grindhouse without leaving your living room with *Zombie Strippers* and *Hell Ride*; learn about the time Bob Dylan discovered Jesus in the doc *Bob Dylan's Jesus Years*; and celebrate 20 years of snark with *Mystery Science Theater 3000: 20th Anniversary Edition*.

[Zombie Strippers](#)

Sony

\$24.96

[Hell Ride](#)

The Weinstein Company

\$19.97

In an alternate universe, where the Robert Rodriguez/Quentin Tarantino double-feature *Grindhouse* was a big hit instead of a major belly-flop, *Zombie Strippers* and *Hell Ride* probably would have served as the line-up for *Grindhouse 2*. Like *Planet Terror* and *Death Proof*, these movies are 21st century glosses on famous '70s exploitation genres, namely the zombie flick and the biker picture. Also like their predecessors, both films are mixed bags, offering some inspired moments amidst uneven screenplays and awkward performances.



Zombie Strippers will probably find the bigger audience on DVD, if only because it stars ex-porn star Jenna



Jameson as one of the titular pole dancers...which means she still gets to show off all her naughty bits for the camera, but doesn't have to put any of them to use. Would you really be surprised if I said that Jameson is a terrible actress? Well, she is. The good thing is that writer/director Jay Lee must have recognized that, because he makes her the first victim of his zombie rampage. Clever guy that he is, Lee finds a way to keep Jameson around (and in a state of undress) following her demise so that her fans don't switch off the DVD at the 30-minute mark. The conceit of *Zombie Strippers* is that Jameson and her fellow strippers actually become better at their jobs after they're transformed into flesh-eating monsters. Their wild gyrations make the horny male patrons so hot and bothered, they willingly become zombie food. It's a funny idea that zombie

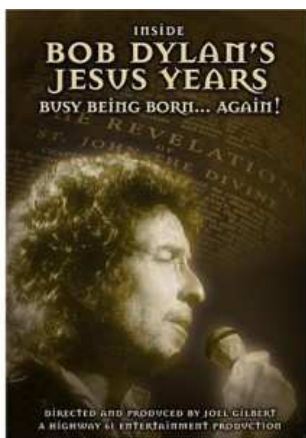
movie godfather George Romero probably would have appreciated. Unfortunately, Lee can't come up with a good story to hang his premise on. After getting off to a decent start, the movie settles into a rut that it never shakes itself out of. While you could chalk this up to the perils of working on a low budget, that argument falls apart when you remember that Romero faced many of the same financial challenges on his zombie pictures and look how well those turned out. No, the real reason *Zombie Strippers* fails is because Lee never got beyond the "Wouldn't it be cool if..." stage of his screenplay.



Story is also the big thing missing from *Hell Ride*, the largely nonsensical tale of a biker gang that roars around on massive hogs fighting each other and rival bands of motorcycle enthusiasts. Writer/director Larry Bishop also serves as the film's star and it's hilarious—not too mention really sad—to see this middle-aged son of Hollywood royalty (his dad is comedian Joey Bishop) act out his fantasies on someone else's (in this case producer Quentin Tarantino's) dime. Bishop plays Pistolero, the grizzled leader of a pack that also includes Michael Madsen and Eric Balfour. Pistolero is on a seemingly never-ending mission to find the killers of his girlfriend Cherokee Kissum, killed decades ago by another biker gang. Now his quest finally seems to be nearing its end...provided he's able to avoid death at the hands of the Six Six Six's, led by former footballer Vinnie Jones. Trust me, that makes the film sound much more comprehensible than it

actually is. But then plot really isn't Bishop's main focus; he's more interested in getting his hands on as many nubile twenty-year-old biker gals as he possibly can. The movie's highlight (or, if you prefer, its nadir) is an impromptu threesome that finds three gals literally begging the craggy-faced Bishop to satisfy their needs. Uh huh, sure Larry...you bet. *Hell Ride* does offer some fun moments—particularly whenever crazy Dennis Hopper shows up to chew some scenery—but for my mental well-being, I kinda wish Bishop had never been given the opportunity to put his fantasy life onscreen.

Extras: *Zombie Strippers* arrives on DVD with a commentary track featuring Jameson and the film's producer and director, as well as roughly 45 minutes of deleted and extended scenes and two making-of featurettes. *Hell Ride* also sports a director yak track and five behind-the-scenes docs, profiling the movie's many motorbikes and hot babes.



[Inside Bob Dylan's Jesus Years: Busy Being Born...Again!](#)

MVD

\$14.95

Most movies about Bob Dylan (both documentaries and *I'm Not There*-style experimental adventures) tend to focus on the folk singer-to-rock-icon transformation he underwent in the early '60s, stopping with his near-fatal brush with death in a 1966 motorcycle accident. And while that period in his life is endlessly fascinating, the 30-year period that followed is also worthy of exploration. Case in point: Dylan's sudden conversion to Christianity in 1978, which stunned his fans and flummoxed music critics. The singer/songwriter recorded three gospel albums during his roughly three-year Christian phase, beginning with 1978's *Slow Train Coming* and concluding with 1981's *Shot of Love*. In addition, he went on an around-the-world tour where he was often confronted by jeering audiences—some of whom were the same listeners that cheered him when he made the controversial move from folk to rock.

It's an extraordinary chapter in Dylan's storied career and it deserves a better film than *Bob Dylan's Jesus Years*, a meandering, mediocre documentary from filmmaker Joel Gilbert. Blocked from speaking with Dylan himself—or from using any of his actual music—Gilbert instead draws the bulk of his material from his former pastor, music producer Jerry Wexler (who oversaw his gospel records) and an assortment of backup singers and musicians who played with him during that time. This still could have yielded an informative movie...if the director had any idea what to ask his subjects. But Gilbert proves a washout as an interviewer, often reading his questions directly off index cards while on-camera and never asking any follow-ups. His library of B-roll footage is also embarrassingly limited—he re-uses the same five minutes of one live show over and over again because he simply doesn't have anything else to cut away to. I guess Gilbert deserves some credit for at least opening the door to this period of Dylan's life—now another filmmaker needs to come along and do it better.

Extras: A fifteen-minute look at Dylan's 1978 World Tour and a short featurette about an all-star performance he gave for imprisoned boxer Ruben "Hurricane" Carter in 1976.



[Mystery Science Theater 3000: 20th Anniversary Edition](#)

Shout! Factory

\$59.98

What's more fun than talking back to the screen during bad movies? Nothing! And that's exactly why *Mystery Science Theater 3000* remains one of the greatest TV series ever broadcast. During its decade-long run—first on a public-access station in Minneapolis then on Comedy Central and finally on the Sci Fi Channel—the crew of the intrepid crew of the Satellite Of Love ridiculed dozens and dozens of Z-grade movies from the '40s, '50s, '60s and '70s. In fact, if the show were still on the air, it's likely that *Zombie Strippers* and *Hell Ride* would be lampooned in the not-too-distant future. Although the interstitial skits mixed into the episodes were never particularly great, the actual talking-back-to-the-screen part was always comedy gold. At one point, the popularity of the show actually led to an *MST3K* feature film...but the result wasn't quite as great as fans hoped. Since the show went off the air in 1999, DVD sets have been coming out fairly regularly, but this 20th anniversary edition offers four titles that haven't made their way to disc yet, including *First Spaceship on Venus*, *Laserblast*, *Werewolf* and *Future War*. And if you need further convincing that this set is worth the \$60 price tag, just take a gander at the bonus features below...

Extras: The highlight of this 20th anniversary release has to be the three-part, 90-minute documentary that explores the complete history of *MST3K*, from its humble public-access origins to its final years on cable. Packed with revealing interviews and vintage behind-the-scenes footage, it's almost as entertaining as an actual episode. Also included is the *MST3K* Reunion Panel from this summer's Comic Con, lobby cards and a small figurine of the show's signature cranky critic, Crow T. Robot.

Also on DVD

You'd think that the presence of Guy Pearce and Oscar winner Catherine Zeta-Jones would be enough to get a movie a sizeable theatrical release, but that wasn't the case with [Death Defying Acts \(Genius Products, \\$19.97\)](#), which passed through a few art-houses last summer, but never crossed over into multiplexes. Pearce stars as legendary illusionist Harry Houdini, who finds himself falling for a beautiful psychic played by the still ravishing Zeta-Jones. But are the psychic's feelings genuine or is she attempting to trick one of the 20th centuries leading tricksters? [Red \(Magnolia, \\$26.98\)](#) is another film that only played a few theaters on its way to DVD, despite a powerhouse lead performance by reliable character actor Brian Cox, best known stateside for his role in the second *X-Men* movie. Cox plays an aging small-town good ol' boy, who goes all *Death Wish* on a trio of young morons after they make the mistake of killing his beloved pooch. Although the movie gets more than a little improbable in the final act, Cox is great throughout—Hollywood, cast him in more stuff please!

Bypassing theaters completely is [Tinker Bell \(Disney, \\$29.99\)](#), a direct-to-DVD CGI cartoon feature starring Peter Pan's faithful fairy sidekick. Perhaps a better title would have been *Tinker Bell Begins* as the movie takes place in the days before Tink met Pete, when she was just another resident of Pixie Hollow. The vocal cast includes Mae Whitman as Tinkerbell, along with Raven-Symoné, America Ferrera, Lucy Liu and Anjelica Huston and the DVD includes such kid-friendly bonus features as DVD-Rom games and a music video by Disney Channel singer Serena Gomez. Look for more Tinker Bell adventures to follow next year.

In documentary news, [Annie Leibovitz: Life Through a Lens \(Warner Bros., \\$19.98\)](#) provides a comprehensive look at the life of the famed photographer, best known for her shots of celebrities like John Lennon and a pregnant Demi Moore. Wonder if Miley Cyrus agreed to talk about her controversial photo shoot as well? Meanwhile, [The Vampire Princess \(Infinity, \\$14.98\)](#) traces the roots of the Dracula legend not to Romanian tyrant Vlad the Impaler but a Czech princess named Eleonore von Schwarzenberg, who was supposedly Bram Stoker's primary influence in penning his now-classic novel.

Turning to TV, fans of the cancelled sci-fi series *The 4400* will never get the closure they deserve—USA axed the show before the writers had a chance to tie up all the loose ends—but at least all four seasons, plus the miniseries that started it all can be found in one place with [The 4400: The Complete Series \(CBS, \\$99.98\)](#). This hefty box set also includes commentary tracks, deleted scenes and new featurettes, which hopefully spill the details on where the series would have gone if it had been allowed to continue. Finally, Sony continues to re-issue complete runs of classic TV shows in handy box sets. The studio's newest batch of titles include '70s staples [Good Times: The Complete Series](#) and [Sanford and Son: The Complete Series](#), as well as the brilliant '90s sitcom [NewsRadio: The Complete Series \(\\$59.95 each\)](#). All of the extras released on previous editions are intact here—the main benefit of these all-in-one sets is being able to save on shelf space, which is a pretty good bonus feature if you ask

me.

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