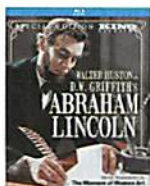


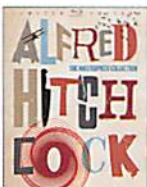
Abraham Lincoln ★★1/2
Kino, 93 min., not rated, Blu-ray: \$34.95



Timed to coincide with the release of Steven Spielberg's feature film *Lincoln*, this is the Blu-ray debut of a 1930 biographical effort by D.W. Griffith, the first of the two sound films made by the legendary director before his career collapsed. While a few crowd sequences are well composed (although the battle scenes are sloppy), *Abraham Lincoln*—which suffers from historical inaccuracies that are only exceeded by their dramatic flatness—mostly consists of stilted, stagy tableaux, beginning with Lincoln's birth and ending with his assassination. Walter Huston plays Abe solemnly, with huge, theatrical gestures more suited to silent film than a talkie, and while the rest of the cast—including twittering Una Merkel as Lincoln's first love—aren't nearly as stiff, the acting here is generally old-fashioned. Still, this is an interesting curio, presented with a fine high-def transfer made from a 35mm print remastered by the Museum of Modern Art, complete with excised scenes that have been recovered over the years (many lack the audio track, so are accompanied by title cards). Extras include a two-part conversation between Huston and Griffith in which the director restates both his disdain for Reconstruction and his positive attitude toward the Ku Klux Klan that made his *The Birth of a Nation* so controversial. For its historical value alone, this should still be considered a strong optional purchase. (F. Switek)

Alfred Hitchcock: The Masterpiece Collection

★★★1/2
Universal, 15 discs, 1,762 min., not rated/PG/PG-13/R, Blu-ray: \$299.98



Not all of the 15 films in this Blu-ray boxed set are masterpieces, but because they hail from the Master of Suspense, all have their merits (and 13 are making their high-def debuts here). Along with the previously available *North by Northwest* and *Psycho*, these are some of Hitchcock's greatest films: *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943), Hitch's personal favorite, with Joseph Cotten as the charming "Merry Widow" killer; *Rope* (1948), Hitch's bold long-take experiment, starring James Stewart; *Rear Window* (1954), starring Stewart and Grace Kelly; *Vertigo* (1958), recently anointed by the *Sight and Sound* poll as the Greatest Film Ever Made, pairing Stewart with Kim Novak; *The Birds* (1963), his memorable contribution to the "animal attack" genre, starring Tippi Hedren; *Marnie* (1964), featuring Hedren and Sean Connery in a chilly vision of psychosis and domination; and *Frenzy* (1972), his first and only film featuring nudity, with a largely British cast that includes Alec McCowen.

The remaining entries are *Saboteur* (1942), *The Trouble with Harry* (1955), *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956), *Torn Curtain* (1966), *Topaz* (1969), and Hitchcock's amusing final work, *Family Plot* (1976). This set has been criticized for mastering problems on some of the entries (notably *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, *Marnie*, *Frenzy*, and *Family Plot*), but the worst offer better images than the previous DVD releases, and the best (such as *Vertigo*) are superb. The generous extras (with a new featurette on the legacy of *The Birds*) include audio commentaries, retrospective and archival behind-the-scenes documentaries and featurettes, interviews, storyboards, stills galleries, a 58-page booklet, and more. Highly recommended. (S. Axmaker)

American Horror Story: The Complete First Season ★★★

Fox, 532 min., not rated, DVD: 4 discs, \$49.98; Blu-ray: 3 discs, \$59.99



From *Glee* creators Ryan Murphy and Brad Falchuk, this dark, disturbing FX channel original is a creepy (at times gruesome) and increasingly compelling horror story told over the course of a season. Set in a gloomy haunted house in Los Angeles, the series stars Dylan McDermott and Connie Britton as Ben and Vivien Harmon, a married couple trying to start again in the wake of infidelity and a miscarriage, with Taissa Farmiga as their angry teenage daughter, Violet. Jessica Lange, who won Emmy and Golden Globe awards for her flamboyant performance, is Sister Jude, the displaced Southern belle next door. Most of the other "neighbors," however, turn up in the Harmons' home—trapped in an afterlife that forces them to replay their terrible stories for every new living resident. The show is filled with voyeuristic and ominous shots (watching from on high, behind doors, down the stairs), a kinky sexual aura, and a hyper-weird atmosphere. The first half of the season seems like all perverse spectacle, but eventually a story (of sorts) emerges. Benefiting from a superb cast that also includes Frances Conroy, Evan Peters, Denis O'Hare, and Mena Suvari, *American Horror Story* is a mature series with large dollops of sex, violence, brutality, betrayal, and sadism. Compiling all 12 episodes from 2011, extras include an audio commentary on the pilot episode, and behind-the-scenes featurettes. Recommended. (S. Axmaker)

Black Like Me ★★★

MVD, 2 discs, 105 min., not rated, DVD: \$24.98



Originally screened in Manhattan the year of the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964, *Black Like Me* is a fictional adaptation of the

true-life tale of progressive white journalist John Howard Griffin, who darkens his skin through a medically induced tanning treatment and then travels the American South in the late 1950s to write about what life's like for the average southern African American. Griffin is played by a seemingly under-confident James Whitmore, who looks undeniably ridiculous in his blackface disguise here. And short of a lynching, he is treated just as badly as you would expect. Whitmore as Griffin never seems comfortable in his new dark skin, and he's too awkward to comfortably settle into African-American culture; but, of course, he's black enough for bigoted Southerners to threaten and belittle him. Picked up as a hitchhiker by white motorists, Griffin has to field creepy questions about things like his presumed burning desire for white women. Not surprisingly, his experiences turn him into an angry, broken man ready to lash out at any perceived slight. Whitmore's performance leaves a lot to be desired, but *Black Like Me* boldly confronts powder-keg racial issues like few films—then or now. Bonus features include the hour-long documentary profile *Uncommon Vision: The Life and Times of John Howard Griffin*, and an excerpt from Robert Bonazzi's authorized biography *Reluctant Activist*. Recommended. (M. Sandlin)

Call the Midwife: Season One ★★★1/2

BBC, 2 discs, 360 min., not rated, DVD: \$34.98, Blu-ray: \$39.98



Drawing from the memoirs of Jennifer Worth, the BBC's *Call the Midwife* stars Jessica Raine as Jenny Lee, a middle-class 22-year-old nurse who takes a job as a midwife at an Anglican convent in 1957, working alongside experienced nuns, including calm Sister Julianne (Jenny Agutter), stern Sister Evangelina (Pam Ferris), and spacey, cake-addicted Sister Monica Joan (Judy Parfitt). Jenny is hardly judgmental, but she finds the poverty permeating London's East End to be challenging (suffice to say that gynecological care has come a long way since the 1950s). To be effective, however, she must learn to put her preconceptions aside regarding unwed mothers, squalid living conditions, and seemingly inappropriate relationships. Jenny's upper-class colleague, Chummy (Miranda Hart), would appear likely to be even more out of her depth, but looks can be deceiving—even if Chummy finds it harder to handle the bikes the nurses use to cycle between appointments. Written by Heidi Thomas and narrated by Vanessa Redgrave as the older Jenny, the series has proven to be as much of a favorite among PBS viewers as *Downton Abbey*. The post-war setting also brings the films of Terence Davies and Mike Leigh to mind, particularly Leigh's *Vera Drake*, in which Imelda Staunton provided off-the-