

and closeted celebrities. The biggest laugh of the season follows, with the final shot of *Free Willzyx*, in which the boys are tricked into believing that a killer whale in a local theme park is talking to them, and subsequently engineer its escape from the park. Every once in a while the creators get a little too preachy, and that is what happens in the final episode of the season, *Bloody Mary*, about the flaws of Alcoholic Anonymous, which is attended by the parent of one of the kids after an incident with the police. There is also a subplot about a Catholic icon that bleeds in an improper location. Nevertheless, the episode still has some wonderfully insightful moments and plenty of great gags.

### Disney singles

A collection of the strongest early silent *Alice* shorts, which got Walt Disney started on his career and empire, are gathered together with a number of animated shorts produced throughout the rest of his lifetime on the Disney DVD *Walt Disney Treasures* release, **Disney Rarities Celebrated Shorts: 1920s - 1960s** (UPC#786936285468, \$33). The black-and-white *Alice* programs place mostly live action shots of a young girl in an animated environment, interacting with animated characters of increasing complexity. Each of the seven shorts is both entertaining and creative, not just resting on the gimmick of combining live action with animation but really exploring its parameters and supplying inventive entertainment. In the first, *Alice's Wonderland*, from 1923, the girl visits a cartoon studio (Disney is there) and then dreams she is in an elaborate cartoon circus land being chased by lions and interacting with other creatures. The 1924 *Alice's Wild West Show* begins like a *Little Rascals* short, with the kids putting on their own backyard 'Wild West' program, and then shifts into some brief cartoon and mixed sequences as the girl describes her adventures to her audience. The opening sequence of the 1924 *Alice Gets the Dutch* is also like *Little Rascals*, as the girl gets into trouble at school and has to sit in the corner. She falls asleep and then dreams she is cavorting with farm animals, who help defend her from the evil teacher. By 1925, *Alice's Egg Plant* is almost entirely animated except for the insertions of the little girl into the animated landscape, and depicts a barnyard egg factory being run by the girl and a Felix-like cat. The operation is threatened by a commie rooster from Eastern Europe who is urging the hens to strike. The girl and the cat character experience various jungle adventures in the 1925 *Alice in the Jungle*, a deft mix of surreal action and artistic inventiveness if you can look the other way when it comes to the native barber. The girl character is animated, rather than photographed, for the most elaborate action segments. Even more imaginative is *Alice's Mysterious Mystery*, which has Fleischer-like mutations and subliminal imagery as a hooded villain steals a schoolhouse and places the students in cages for processing. Finally, the art is more sophisticated and elaborate in the 1927 *Alice The Whaler*, which is mostly about various animals operating a ship at sea with just a few brief shots of the girl mixed in.

The black-and-white shorts are generally in good shape and are accompanied by stereophonic musical scores with incidental sound effects. The remaining cartoons on both platters are not so much rarities—although some are far less anthologized than others—as they are 'singles,' pieces that are put together mostly without franchise characters. The complete collection on the first platter (including the *Alice* shorts) runs 170 minutes, and the collection on the second platter runs 156 minutes. Each has a 'Play All' option, as well as two separate menus that list the cartoons both chronologically—which is how they play in the 'Play All'—and alphabetically. In general, the transfers are lovely and the monophonic sound is solid. Where applicable, there are optional English subtitles. Each platter opens with a Leonard Maltin introduction that runs a couple of minutes.

Following the *Alice* shorts, the first platter presents the well known 1938 Oscar winner, *Ferdinand the Bull*, and the remarkably topical, in a political activist sort of way, 1943 *Chicken Little*, which appeared in the **Walt Disney On the Front Lines** collection (Jul 04). *The Pelican and the Snipe*, from 1944, was a discarded **Three Caballeros** segment about a big sea bird and a little sea bird who have various close calls with disaster. The story of Casey Jones is told in the 1950 *The Brave Engineer*, which also makes extensive use of the train developed for *Dumbo*. *Morris, The Midget Moose*, also from 1950, is about an adult moose with child-sized proportions who proves his worth to his peers. Another variation on *Dumbo*, the 1952 *Lambert The Sheepish Lion* is about a lion who is mistakenly delivered to a herd of sheep by a stork and thinks he is a sheep until he finds his true worth defending the herd from a predator. Also from 1952 is the excellent adaptation of the popular children's book, *The Little House*, about a residential structure that survives urban expansion. Three programs from 1953 fill out the side, the lengthy *Ben and Me*, about a mouse helping Benjamin Franklin; an owl music teacher presenting a somewhat unclear lesson to a class of bird and animal students in *Adventures in Music: Melody*; and a rather clever staging of an old-fashioned football team playing against a 'modern' team in *Football Now and Then*. Also featured on the platter is an excellent 11-minute interview with the elderly actress who played the first Alice, Virginia Davis, and an 8-minute segment on Disney's career during the silent era.

The second platter opens with the 1954 *Pigs Is Pigs*, about a stationmaster trying to cope with a shipment of guinea pigs that keeps getting bigger and bigger as he challenges the bureaucracy of the home office to classify the animals' status. The animation is noticeably sparser than the cartoons closing out the first platter, but *Social Lion*, also from 1954, has a more traditional look—as an African lion gets loose in New York City. A

letterboxed presentation of the 1956 Cinemascope cartoon, *Hooked Bear* depicts a wildlife ranger discouraging a bear in his charge from taking advantage of a lake stocked with fish for campers. Also from 1956 is *Jac and Old Mac*, an adaptation of two nursery rhymes, *The House That Jack Built*, done in line animation that manipulates the letters of words, and *Old MacDonald Had a Farm*, presented as a jazz performance; another letterboxed ranger and bear cartoon entitled *In the Bag*, about picking up litter; and the sweet *A Cowboy Needs a Horse*, about a little boy whose imagination is riffing on a western theme as he falls asleep. The automobile is put on trial in the 1957 *The Story of Anyburg, USA*, but a bright defense lawyer proves that it is man, not machine, that is the problem. The 1957 *Truth about Mother Goose* supposedly explains the origins of the various nursery rhymes, many of which grew out of the cutthroat British political climate in the Restoration era. The longish 1958 *Paul Bunyan* is included, as is the less well known 1958 stop motion animation rendition of *Noah's Ark*, much of which is constructed with 'found objects.' The 1960 *Goliath* mines *Dumbo* territory yet again—as well as that Chuck Jones cartoon about a tiny elephant—as it is set in Africa where a very small elephant tries to earn the respect of his very large father. An interesting and creative tall tale featuring vocals from The Sons of the Pioneers, the 1961 *The Saga of Windwagon Smith* is about a town that builds a huge sailing wagon to transport goods across the prairie. Finally, there is the 1962 *A Symposium on Popular Songs*, which traces the history of American musical genres with each segment animated in a different stop motion or cut out style. Maltin and composer Richard Sherman supply a passable commentary over the latter. Also featured on the platter is a 2-minute predecessor-to-United-Way 'Community Chest' promotion featuring Pluto, and still galleries of the developmental artwork for *Ferdinand*, *Little House*, *Anyburg*, *Chicken Little*, *Paul Bunyan*, *Truth about Mother Goose*, and *Cowboy Needs a Horse*.

### Mammal society

The fascinating Animal Planet series, taken from a legitimate scientific study documenting close to a year in the lives of prairie dog-type animals, meerkats, that live on the edge of a desert in South Africa, is available in a three-platter box set from Animal Planet, **Meerkat Manor Season 1** (SKU770552, \$40). Each of the thirteen episodes runs 20 minutes and is presented in letterboxed format only, with an aspect ratio of about 1.78:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback. The image is sharp and clear, and the stereo sound gives the musical score an acceptable dimensionality. There is no captioning, and no 'Play All' option on the platters, which have rather laborious menus.

The program is designed to entertain and never shares educational information that cannot be imparted in more than a brief sentence or two by the narrator, Sean Astin, whose voice appears to have been chosen for its lack of gravitas. The animals live in large family groups and their social dynamics have been meticulously recorded, allowing the program to become an engaging, semi-anthropomorphic soap opera, full of violence, eliciting love affairs, death, sickness, politics, feasts, heroic self-sacrifice and relaxing joie de vivre. The animals do have a human-like demeanor, particularly when they stand watch on two legs while their brethren forage, and the identifications of their actions and conflicts are accurate, even if those identifications are being phrased in overly human terms. There are times when the program comes perilously close to repeating itself, as there is not as much cultural variety in the day-to-day lives of the meerkats as there is in our own, but as it charts the fortunes of the group chosen for study, there are enough accomplishments and setbacks, both for the group as a whole, and for individual animals, to sustain the length of the season.

### Living on through music

A documentary about Celtic musical artists in Canada, France and the British Isles, **Celtic Tides A Musical Odyssey**, is available from MPI Home Video (UPC#030306782799, \$20). Although running just 46 minutes, the 1998 program manages to provide a reasonably solid overview of the genre and delivers what are in essence samples of various artists that the viewer may want to investigate further. There is more interview footage than performance footage, but the balance feels appropriate for the program, and the music is often lurking in the background even when people are talking. Among those featured are The Chieftains, Clannad, Mary Black, Altan, Dougie MacLean, Loreena McKennitt and Old Blind Dogs. The full screen picture is reasonable sharp and the colors look fresh. The stereo sound has a strong presence and a workable dimensionality. There are optional English subtitles.

### International reggae

An elderly reggae singer is backed by a white band on the funky MVD release, **Lee 'Scratch' Perry in Concert The Ultimate Alien** (UPC#022891022893, \$20). The show is his, and the support is mostly indistinguishable from a regular reggae group. Shot in a small Brighton England hall, the 2003 program, which runs 63 minutes, is a cheerful and successful mix of musical culture. It sounds good, too, with a 5.1-channel Dolby Digital track that has a solid dimensionality and strong tones. The full screen picture is a little dark, but workable. There is no captioning. Also featured, along with a beer commercial featuring Perry and a text profile, is a 40-minute interview with Perry, talking about his life and art as he rolls and smokes something that doesn't necessarily have the body and swirl one associates with loose tobacco.