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Betty White In Black And White / Dennis Hopper: The Early Works / Trek Stars Go West

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By Noel Murray January 12, 2011

Some actors become stars by playing iconic characters, and some by playing multiple variations on a type, but early in their careers, they're all mainly just trying to get a foothold by doing whatever's asked of them. Three recent DVDs from the "Johnny Legend Presents" line collect public-domain movies and TV shows starring well-known personalities—Betty White, Dennis Hopper, and the cast of *Star Trek*—and though the sound and picture quality on each set is poor, all three are useful for the way they capture now-famous faces doing their best to become indelible.

Betty White In Black And White tracks White's quick rise, from her star turn in the early-'50s syndicated sitcom *Life With Elizabeth* (which she co-produced) to her shift into slicker network sitcoms and a daily talk show. The two episodes of *Life With Elizabeth* on the disc are a real treat; the writers made a virtue of their tiny budget, emphasizing White's puckish charms by casting her as a newlywed opposite Del Moore. Each episode features two or three brief vignettes from the couple's daily lives, as they bicker playfully with each other, the way young lovers do. ABC tried to replicate the success of *Life With Elizabeth* in the 1957-58 sitcom *Date With The Angels* (later renamed *The Betty White Show* and retooled to add more variety elements), but though White was still charming as yet another young wife, the larger cast and Lucille Ball-style broad comedy lacks *Life With Elizabeth's* gentle sophistication. Far more fascinating is the one sample here of White's 1954 NBC morning show, in which she reads jokes and riddles from viewers and banters with her band, with that mix of sweetness and worldliness that's made her such a perennial favorite.

Dennis Hopper: The Early Works peaks with the 1961 Curtis Harrington cult classic *Night Tide*, a feature-length thriller in which Hopper plays a Navy man who gets led into danger by a woman who claims to be an honest-to-goodness mermaid. Harrington was an avant-garde filmmaker and critic who drifted into artfully trashy genre films and later, episodic television, and he found a sympathetic collaborator in Hopper, a Hollywood upstart who often had difficulty reconciling his Method-acting inclinations with his willingness to work for anyone who'd hire him. Aptly, this disc includes an episode of *Petticoat Junction* that spoofs Hopper's reputation in the industry, casting him as a hard-edged Greenwich Village poet ready to blast the show's small-town rubes for their hypocrisy—until he gets offered \$2,000 to write a dog-food jingle. *The Early Works* also features episodes of the mid-'50s procedurals *Medic* and *Public Defender*, and one from the anthology series *The Loretta Young Show*, each of which has Hopper playing troubled young men so overwhelmed by life's inherent cruelty that they try to get a jump on it by being a little cruel themselves. Typical Hopper, in other words.

As for *Trek Stars Go West*, it spreads six hours of movies and TV episodes across two discs, featuring Leonard Nimoy as a devious Comanche (in *Tate*) and two different card sharps (in *Bonanza* and *Outlaws*); William Shatner as a conscience-stricken crook (in *Outlaws*) and both a cowboy hero and his drug-addled twin brother (in the Mexican Western feature *White Comanche*); James Doohan as a violent townsman and a violent Indian (in two separate segments of *The Last Of The Mohicans*); and Deforest Kelley as a rancher (in a 1949 episode of *The Lone Ranger*). The quality of the material ranges from painfully bad to exceptional—the canny, well-written *Outlaws* represents the latter—but all of them demonstrate the limitations of stardom. Like White and Hopper, the future *Star Trek* cast members used their early opportunities to make an impression, but White and Hopper had the good fortune to move from project to project, adapting their personae to the changing times. Once the *Star Trek* gang put on the uniforms of the Federation, they assured themselves of showbiz immortality while also assuring that that fans would never see them in any project again without first thinking of the *Enterprise*. Even in braided hair and buckskins, Nimoy looks like a Vulcan. Such is the price of fame.

Key features: None.

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