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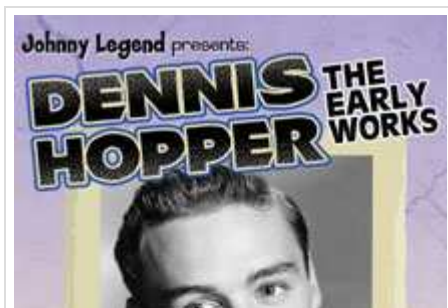
Writings on film and other things by Ray Young. Text is copyright © 2010 by the author.

Above: Anouk Aimée

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 28, 2010

## Remembrance of things passé

- Just when you thought there couldn't be another angle to Baby Boomer nostalgia, not one but *three* new DVDs are here to tap that



graying audience. Under the banner "Johnny Legend Presents," they tackle such unlikely compatriots as Betty White, Dennis Hopper and the original cast of *Star Trek* in their salad days, a black

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and white blitz of Camelot-era pop culture, from a time before the term pop culture even existed.

Readers of this blog will no doubt reach for *Dennis Hopper: The Early Works*, which contains “his very first

screen appearances and the movie that made him A *LEGEND!*” — their quote, italics, and caps. The movie in question, Curtis Harrington’s *Night Tide* (1963), came out six years before Hopper’s true calling card, *Easy Rider*, but it did offer him his first starring role. Playing a lonely sailor hooking up with a woman who — in varying shades of *Cat People* — may be a mermaid, it was marketed as a supernatural thriller but actually shares more with Harrington’s early avant-garde work. It co-stars Luana Anders (later to *skinny dip* with Hopper, Sabrina Scharf and Peter Fonda in *Easy Rider*), the ethereal *Linda Lawson*, and the even etherealer *Cameron*. (Hardcore cinephiles should keep an eye peeled for brief glimpses of Bruno VeSota and Ben Roseman, veterans of the *très* strange *Dementia* [1955].) While it’s always nice to see *Night Tide*, the version here, though letterboxed, is a substandard print that hasn’t been digitally enhanced for widescreen TVs — which is baffling since all they sell nowadays are widescreen TVs. Don’t fret: there’s a vastly superior version of *Night Tide* available from *Amazon*.

As if to prove the term “classic television” an oxymoron, the rest of the set is filled with four samples of early work done for the tube. Broadcast in 1955, the “Boy in the Storm” episode of the *Medic* series has nineteen-year-old Dennis prophetically cast as an artistic teen given to crazy outbursts and drooling fits. A kindly doctor recognizes epilepsy, and, as Victor Young’s wailing strings tug at the heart, everyone’s poised to shed a tear over his graceful fortitude. The highpoint, while far from politically correct, is Dennis convulsing in a balls-to-the-walls epileptic fit. Othello it ain’t.

“Mama’s Boy” (1955) from *Public Defender*, stars Reed Hadley as the legal council out to prove Dennis acted in self defense in the murder of his pantywaist pal. From *The Loretta Young Show*, “Inga II” (1955) has him as a spoiled rich kid learning the ropes on a farm. While Loretta shamelessly revamps her *Farmer’s Daughter* character from the 1947 film, complete with hair pretzel-braided into a pair of ungainly earmuffs, the rest of the cast is a who’s who of second-tier character actors: Paul Brinegar (the idiot assistant in *How to Make a Monster* [1958]), post-Slip Mahoney Bowery Boy

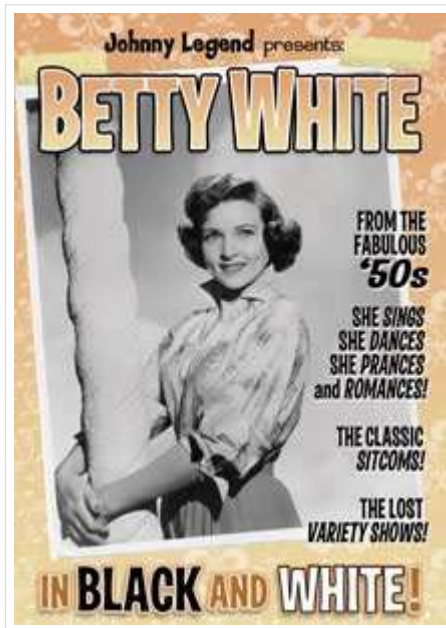
Art by Paul Rader

Wendy, I’m home . . .



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Stanley Clements, Donald (*Frankenstein's Daughter*) Murphy, and the ubiquitous Kathleen Freeman. In “Bobbie Jo and the Beatnik” (1964) from *Petticoat Junction* (missing its theme song due to



copyright complications), Hopper’s an angry Greenwich Village poet inexplicably transplanted to Hooterville, wooing one of Uncle Joe’s bimbo nieces. Even then, you could smell the madness in his wake.

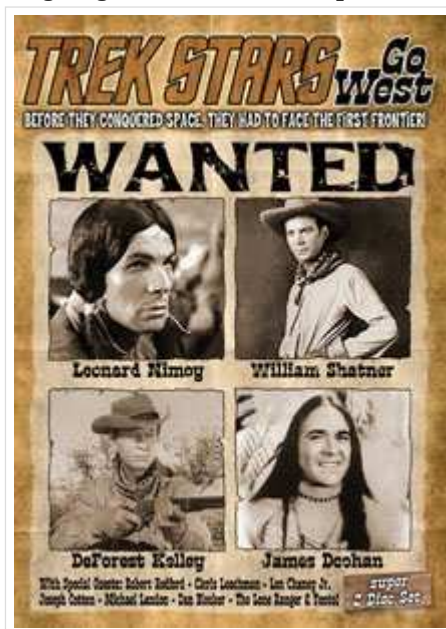
The gulf separating Dennis Hopper from Betty White is as wide as the distance between *Blue Velvet* and *The Sound of Music*. I would have used a Betty White movie for that illustration,

but, for the life of me, I can’t think of one. Ms. White, who recently began moonlighting as a kitsch icon (notably as host of *Saturday Night Live*), is not generally regarded as an actress, comedian, singer or dancer. She is simply Betty White, an odd, untethered career unto itself. Upon glancing over the slipcase for *Betty White in Black and White*, I was taken by surprise. Everyone used to recognize her as a gameshow panelist, but I never knew Betty as a sitcom star in the 1950s. Morning and daytime television in my childhood was littered with reruns of nearly anything you could imagine, but Betty’s *Life With Elizabeth* (1952-1955), *A Date With the Angels* (1957-1958) and *The Betty White Show* (*two of them!*: 1954 and 1958) were never shown in my neck of the woods.

The DVD anthology is three hours of such antediluvian Betty mania. The earlier *Betty White Show* was a daytime café klatch, the star occasionally appearing unscripted and working on an intimate level with the viewer — *Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood* for hausfraus. The one episode here finds her and bandleader **Frank DeVol** fêteing a young girl on “Wish Day.” Visibly uncomfortable and struggling to smile and not cry, the twelve-year-old has the unenviable task of presenting one of Winston Churchill’s flunkies with a birthday present for the Prime Minister. (Apparently Winnie was too busy to drop by himself.) The later *Betty White Show* was a generic sitcom with Betty and Del Moore as a suburban couple prone to (surprise! surprise!) wacky misunderstandings. One of the two episodes in the collection features 50s scream queen **Gloria Talbot** (*Daughter of Dr. Jekyll*, *The Cyclops*, *I Married a Monster from Outer Space* — and

the daughter in Douglas Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows*) as Moore's vavavoom-ish secretary. About the business papers she's got pressed against her hefty, missile-bra'd breasts, Moore says, "That's quite a stack!"

Betty's *Life With Elizabeth*, on the other hand, transcends camp, unwittingly mining its humor from the tense undercurrent running through a strained marriage. Each episode is broken down into three unrelated vignettes, introduced through the used-car-dealer smile of host Jack Narz. The couple (Betty and Moore) appear immune to the verbal slings and arrows they fire at one another, mostly on a claustrophobic living room set that could double as a jail cell. Yes, it's a comedy, but the repressed anger within Betty's Elizabeth, laughing to herself over private, unshared jokes, is evident in



enough barbed giggling, smirking and teasing to lay the groundwork for a freshman-year psychology thesis on rage and self-loathing.

The most outré of the three DVDs combines *Star Trek* with the wild west in the two-disc set, *Trek Stars Go West*. 1950s and 60s television was overrun with Cowboys & Indians, long before the term Native American was coined, when

schoolbooks and common opinion never equated their wholesale slaughter with genocide. In keeping with the times, network programming favored simpleminded scenarios, mundane problems and easy solutions. Common plot elements running through the shows offered here, for example, have less to do with political or racial issues than with the workaday lives of white dudes, their honor amongst themselves, and the ceaseless trouble instigated — on the farm, on the ranch or in the saloon — by pesky womenfolk.

A braided Leonard Nimoy is onscreen only briefly as a conniving Comanche in an episode of *Tate* (1960). Written by Harry Julian Fink, the show is chockablock with the same brand of simmering stoicism he later brought to his *Dirty Harry* characters. After being a major nuisance to the locals, the future Mr. Spock is scalped (offscreen, 'natch) by a very young Robert Redford. We're then treated to Nimoy as a sourpuss saloon manager/pimp in "The Ape," a

1960 *Bonanza* (also missing its theme song) which attempts to, well, ape Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* as hulking Hoss (Dan Blocker) plays George to **Cal Bolder's** Lennie — dumb and dumber — six years before Bolder fell into the abyss of *Jesse James Meets Frankenstein's Daughter*. Again from 1960, Nimoy is a gun for hire in a town lorded over by a bullying land baron in “Shorty” from the forgotten *Outlaws* series. Sharply written by **Daniel Mainwaring**, it revisits the themes of power and intimidation prevalent in his screenplays for *Out of the Past*, *The Big Steal*, *The Hitch-Hiker*, *The Phenix City Story*, and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*.

There's also a two-part *Outlaws*, “Starfall” (1960), a restrained William Shatner co-starring with Edgar Buchanan (*Petticoat Junction's* Uncle Joe), John (*Attack of the Puppet People*) Hoyt, Warners regular Barton MacLane, Jack Warden (!), Cloris Leachman (!!), and Victor (King Tut) Buono. They've disinterred a 1949 installment of *The Lone Ranger* with DeForest ('Bones') Kelley; and a 1957 broadcast of *Hawkeye and the Last of the Mohicans* with James ('Scotty') Doohan grossly overshadowed by Lon Chaney Jr. as Chingachgook. The pot of fool's gold at the end of this black and white rainbow, however, is the full color feature film *White Comanche* (1968). Shot on the cheap in Spain, it stars Shatner as twin half breed brothers. One's virtuous, the other a peyote-swilling renegade lording over a band of sycophants, or: Marlon Brando in *One-Eyed Jacks* versus Marlon Brando in *Apocalypse Now*, minus the talent (and budget). Joseph Cotton is there too, but by the time he wanders in, you may think you've lost your mind.

To order online, click:

- [Dennis Hopper: The Early Works](#)
- [Betty White in Black and White](#)
- [Trek Stars Go West](#)

POSTED BY FLICKHEAD AT 7:47 AM

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3 COMMENTS:

 Greg said...

These reviews were far better written than their subjects deserved. I'd recommend to anyone to just read your reviews instead of watching the shows.

6:14 PM EST

 Flickhead said...

Thanks!!!

And Happy Thanksgiving to you and the family!

9:40 PM EST

 StuartOhQueue said...

The "Trek" and "Hopper" posters are so courageously cornball I feel as if I must make them mine!

2:27 AM EST

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