

### Beyond those of mortal men

The widely beloved television series, Adventures of Superman The Complete First Season, has been released by Warner Home Video (UPC#012569420021, \$40). Originally broadcast in syndication in 1952 and 1953, George Reeves delivers a commanding performance both as the caped superhero and as his guarded but pro-active alter ego, the newspaper reporter. What is special about Reeves, and what has made the program endure as much as any factor, is the professionalism that he brings to even the most innocuous transitional scene. He communicates such a strong sense of presence that everyone around him seems, well, more humanly fallible. The five-platter set contains twenty-six 26-minute episodes, and when seen as a group, it becomes readily apparent that the creators took the comic book source of their subject to heart. The show's plots are always engagingly fanciful. They are not overly absurd, but they are not simply straight crime dramas with an indestructible hero inserted in the template, either. Each episode is just far-fetched enough to be genuinely different from the stories in other half-hour action shows, but still serious enough to avoid alienating adult sensibilities. Like all half-hour dramas, they are brief, but they are still great fun, and age has not compromised their energy or essential spirit. Phyllis Coates co-stars, with Jack Larson ('Jimmy Olsen') and John Hamilton ('Perry White').

Each platter has a 'Play All' option. With the exception of one battered episode noted below, the full screen black-and-white picture is in excellent condition, with crisp contrasts and deep blacks. The monophonic sound is fine. There are optional English, French and Spanish subtitles. Several of the plot summations on the jacket are mistakenly juggled and paired with the wrong title.

The opener, *Episode 1 Superman on Earth*, is an origin episode, deftly presenting the full, familiar story of the character's birth on another planet, his childhood in the American farmland and the establishment of his alter ego as a reporter in a big city, introducing the other characters as well and concluding with a quick action scene. The follow-up, *Episode 2 The Haunted Lighthouse*, has a lovely Scooby-Doo atmosphere and focuses on Larson's character, who is visiting an aunt and stumbles across a smuggling operation and an eerie call for help. The episode is accompanied by commentary from historian Gary H. Grossman, who relates his own pleasures the first time he saw the episode as a child, points out bloopers, and fills in some history of the show's production. Crooks use a ventriloquist to pass information about armored car routes in *Episode 3 The Talkative Dummy*. In great cliffhanger tradition, Larson's character is trapped in a safe that plunges from a skyscraper, and there is also a good plot twist at the end. Crooks go around smashing a line of statuettes at specialty stores in *Episode 4 The Mystery of the Broken Statues*, attracting the attention of Coates' character, who is then threatened by the bad guys. A Cold War thriller, an organ grinder's monkey is used to pass secrets in *Episode 5 The Monkey Mystery*. Coates' character is held hostage at a motel and must sneak a message back home to be rescued in *Episode 6 A Night of Terror*.

A little handicapped girl receives information by accident that crooks want to obtain, so they dress up one of their members and pretend he is Superman to coax her into revealing what she knows in the entertaining *Episode 7 The Birthday Letter*. When she doesn't cooperate, those mean bad guys take away her leg braces. Grrr. The bad guys (the same actors are often used as villains, though as different characters in each episode) use a long-distance mind control device to upset a crime hearing in *Episode 8 The Mind Machine*. It takes an entertainingly excruciatingly long time for Reeves' character to find out that Coates character has become trapped in a mine cave-in in *Episode 9 Rescue*. The bad guy develops a 'truth drug' to seek the hero's alternate identity in *Episode 10 The Secret of Superman*. Capitalizing on America's infatuation with televised wrestling, the hero never goes in the ring for *Episode 11 No Holds Barred* (for some reason, a surrogate does, instead), but he does take care of ruffians in a gymnasium. In the eerie *Episode 12 The Deserted Village*, some guy in a radiation suit is wandering around an otherwise almost empty town, and the heroes have to figure out what he is up to and what happened to the other people.

The one episode that is in rough physical condition, *Episode 13 The Stolen Costume* has numerous scratches and speckles, but it is worth the wear. A bad guy steals the hero's costume from his apartment, and the hero has to get help from the police without explaining what was stolen, and take some preventive measures to stop the villains from revealing his identity. Grossman supplies an enthusiastic commentary. In the fun *Episode 14 Treasure of the Incas*, the heroes travel to South America (or a backlot rendition thereof) when a tapestry is stolen that holds a secret to hidden treasure. Don't miss *Episode 15 Double Trouble*. The plot is a fairly serious story about a German spy sneaking into America (in drag) and arranging the transportation of stolen radium. When Reeves' character corners him, he mutters something about 'Übermensch' as he fires his gun in vain. Wax museum stories are always a kick, and *Episode 16 Mystery in Wax* is especially engaging, with an enjoyable plot and many fun moments, as Coates' character is slated to become the next wax figure. And who can resist *Episode 17 Runaway Robot*, in which the hero battles a large mechanical tin can after crooks grab the scientist who developed it? Or *Episode 18 Drums of Death*, in which Hamilton's character becomes involved with Haitian voodoo?

Another Scooby-Doo piece, *Episode 19 The Evil Three*, has Larson and Hamilton's characters visiting a country retreat where bad guys are trying to dissuade visitors from sticking around as they search for treasure. An old

lady also gets pushed down some stairs in her wheelchair. It's great fun. There is a commentary by film historian Chuck Harter, who also supplies production details, performer backgrounds and other insights, and makes sure you don't miss the episode bloopers, just as Grossman did. Asian-American characters enliven *Episode 20 Riddle of the Chinese Jade*, with secret trap doors in their stores and diabolical schemes. A very witty and entertaining installment, a man straps dynamite to himself in *Episode 21 The Human Bomb* and threatens to blow up both himself and the heroes while on a ledge in the newspaper building. Reeves' character ends up catching Larson's character in mid-air. A 'Hollywood mystery' piece, *Episode 22 Czar of the Underworld* is set on a movie shoot, where someone is trying to stop the production of a crime film that hits too close to the truth. Then it is up to the 'Canadian woods' for *Episode 23 The Ghost Wolf*, where, initially, the newspaper's pulp supply appears to be threatened by a werewolf. The episode includes a terrific train trestle collapse. Although it is sort of a clip episode, *Episode 24 Crime Wave*, in which the hero works his way up the organized crime ladder to undermine the unknown leader of a crime syndicate, is still highly entertaining. There is a lot of action in the clips and Reeves' character is trapped in a lead room, zapped with sparks and appears to be overcome by the attack.

The one real shortcoming of the set is that no background information accompanies the presentation of the 1951 theatrical film, Superman and the Mole-Men, and the two-part TV episode that was culled from it, *Episode 25 The Unknown People Part 1* and *Episode 26 The Unknown People Part 2*. Mole-Men runs 58 minutes. It would be interesting to hear how closely the film was entwined with the conception of the series, since it tends to take the characters—Reeves and Coates have the same billing they have in First Season, though none of the other regulars appear—and their relationship for granted. The first revelation that Reeves' character is more than he appears holds no particular surprise—it is just his standard run into an alley and then leap out of it. In any case, the story, about beings from beneath the earth's surface, is wonderfully creepy and enjoyable.

Also featured on the fifth platter is a nice 17-minute retrospective piece about the series, 5 minutes of commercials for Frosted Flakes with Reeves, and a wonderful and gorgeous 20-minute Technicolor action short starring Reeves entitled *Pony Express Days*, about getting word to California that Abraham Lincoln has won the presidential election before the secessionists can sway voters to support their side (they give rifles to Indians to stop the Pony Express riders).

### One case

In the tradition of Murder One, The Wire The Complete First Season, an HBO Video release (98873, \$100), is a season-long, novel-like telling of a single story, about a Baltimore police unit that is going after a major drug dealer. Along with the basic appeal that such a story can offer, and the inevitably superb performances, what makes the program so compelling is its attention to detail. Characters grow and change their habits from episode to episode, based upon the experiences they've had and the people they've met. The technical aspects of the wiretaps, surveillance and witness manipulations are also fascinating (as are the intricacies of the drug operation and the legal maneuverings), while the corruption and indifference of the heroes' superiors sustains an air of fragility over the entire endeavor, as if the whole operation could collapse at any moment. The writing is excellent (although one sequence goes overboard, where two detectives examine a crime scene using nothing but the 'f' word to communicate with one another) and the performances are seamless. Originally broadcast in 2002, the program runs thirteen episodes, most lasting about 52 minutes, but a few going on a little longer than that (the total running time is 775 minutes), making it ideal for a day's escape without leaving the confines of your viewing room. Dominic West, and Frankie Faison star, with Wood Harris as their target.

The episodes are spread to five platters and there is no 'Play All' option. The picture is presented in full screen format only, and the color transfer looks fine, bearing in mind that the filmmakers go for the popular urban documentary look. The 5.1-channel Dolby Digital sound has a solid mix and a satisfying dimensionality. There are alternate French and Spanish audio tracks in standard stereo and optional English, French and Spanish subtitles. Three of the episodes are accompanied by commentary tracks from various members of the creative team, all of them talking about the inspirations for the show (much of it is drawn from actual cases and people), the shooting logistics and other production details.

### Kottke and his guitar

Guitarist Leo Kottke is effectively captured in a 1988 concert program, Leo Kottke Home & Away Revisited, an MVD release (UPC#022891050391, \$20). The 91-minute program not only presents his deft, articulate fingering and pleasant on-stage demeanor (he plays, sings and tells stories), it also looks at what his life is like off the stage, as he shows off his broken guitars, reworked car engines and an unused motorboat sitting in his backyard. You kind of wish that all music stars were this uncomplicated. The DVD also offers an option that skips over the profile parts and just gives 62 minutes of performance sequences. The full screen picture is reasonably sharp and fresh, and the sound is crisp, with a mild dimensionality. There is no captioning. There are 16 minutes of additional off stage footage that is as entertaining as the material in the show itself.