

how the production was conceived and the cast was organized. "We thought the most interesting thing about [Hewitt and Conrad's characters] having a new, budding marriage, and the sexiness and the romance, is that it's one of the only healthy marriages on television right now. Every marriage that we see in a series is dysfunctional, and it's such a funny idea that a 'fresh idea' is a healthy marriage." The best talk is the one during *Undead Comic*, which includes Tyler, who does standup comedy herself and talks a little bit about the lifestyle.

Confinement cliffhanger

Pity the poor broadcast television junkies who have to wait week after excruciating week to get their next fix of the exhilarating cliffhanger drama, **Prison Break**, while all DVD fans had to do was contain their curiosity until the season was over, and then pick up the 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment release, **Prison Break Season One** (UPC#024543-260820, \$60), and gorge themselves in one or two marathon sittings. The highly entertaining series may push the bounds of credulity here and there, but the payoffs are well worth the suspension of disbelief, and once you start watching, it is almost impossible to stop. Wentworth Miller stars as a resourceful structural engineer who deliberately causes himself to be put in prison so he can help spring his brother, played by Dominic Purcell, from Death Row. The various convicts he befriends or makes deals with all have enjoyable personalities, wicked or otherwise, and there are government conspiracies and other forces at work that greatly enlarge the scope of the conflict and create unexpected difficulties. The show has an ideal mix of physical and emotional excitement, and it is smartly put together so there is rarely a sense that the narrative is being padded or stretched out when the hero encounters a set back. The series is so smartly designed that when the flashback episode that fills in the backstory finally arrives, you are taken totally by surprise because it occurs so late in the season—just at the moment when you are most anxious not to have the story interrupted, even though it answers so many questions that you are riveted to it, anyway. We don't want to spoil any more surprises, except to say that by the end of the season the heroes do indeed escape, out of the frying pan and into the fire.

The twenty-two 44-minute episodes are spread across six platters. There is no 'Play All' option, but each episode is reliably chapter encoded so you can jump over the opening credit sequence. The picture is presented in letterboxed format only, with an aspect ratio of about 1.78:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback. Although the color scheme is often dour, the image transfer is sharp and solid. The 5.1-channel Dolby Digital sound is fine for TV and comes with a pleasing surround effect every now and then. There are optional English, French and Spanish subtitles. Across the six platters, there are about 6 minutes of deleted scenes that fill in a few story points deemed unnecessary in the cutthroat accommodation of broadcast running times. The final platter also contains six TV commercials for the show and 63 minutes of decent production documentaries, revealing how the producers utilized Illinois' former Joliet prison and how episodes and scenes were executed.

Six of the episodes also feature a total of ten commentaries from various members of the cast and crew. Most of the talks are lightly informative, explaining how various sequences were achieved and what sort of planning went into the show. The strongest offering is the one featuring the director of the pilot, Brett Ratner, who offers the clearest and most detailed explanation of how the series was constructed and what the creators wanted to achieve. There is rarely any mention in any of the talks about Joliet, except for how pretty it looks at sunrise, but here and there you do pick up a little prison lore. "Talking to a lot of prison guards, my first impression was that they would talk very disparagingly about the cons, but they actually talk about them, almost, like, reverentially, because they say that these guys sit around 365 days a year, 24/7, and figure out how to do things. They say that basically, they're all geniuses, they can figure out how to do anything."

New Orleans nightlife in the good old days

Back in happier times, Fats Domino, Ray Charles, Jerry Lee Lewis and Ron Wood took the stage together in a New Orleans nightclub, an event that was fortunately recorded for posterity and is delivered on the Time Life release, **Fats & Friends** (UPC#610583341898, \$20). The 58-minute program, shot in 1986, includes interviews with the musicians as they are waiting to go on, which are interspersed between each number. As the entire show has a party-like atmosphere, however, the interruptions are not a problem. The set is lively and celebratory, with the musicians enjoying themselves as much as the viewer does.

The full screen picture looks fine, with sharp, accurate colors. The stereo surround sound is clear and solid, with a full dimensionality. There is no captioning. Also featured are 51 minutes of additional interviews and a few more performance clips, all of which are as enjoyable as the material that made it into the program.

Peterson at the keyboard

The Bach-like improvisations last for 81 minutes on the transcendent Inakustik release, **Oscar Peterson Trio The Berlin Concert** (UPC#707787646079, \$20). Shot in 1985, the camera, dipping and floating, is close enough to Peterson and his piano that you can feel him inventing and exploring as he works his way through the symmetries and complexities of each number. Backed by drums and a bass, the concert is an excellent

presentation of Peterson's artistry and is as stimulating as it is relaxing.

The full screen picture is very sharp, and details are clearly delineated. There is both a 5.1-channel Dolby Digital track and a slightly meatier DTS track, both of which deliver a full dimensionality and a precise clarity.

What bubbles to the surface when dredging the past

At some point they're going to all have canes and we'll be safe, but for now there are still rock 'n roll revivals where aging pop singers from the Fifties and Sixties do their best to evoke the semblances of the hits that once made them briefly famous, as equally elderly audience members try desperately to recall who it was they were making out with when they heard those hits on the radio. Shot in a Florida venue that caters exclusively to such arrangements, the MVD releases, **Live at the Rock 'n' Roll Palace Volume 1** (UPC#022891654896, \$13) and **Live at the Rock 'n' Roll Palace Volume 2** (UPC#022891654996, \$13), each feature eight artists, all of whom sing two songs apiece before an audience that is allowed to get up and dance in front of the stage, if they can manage to do so without leaving their blinkers on. Contrary to the hour listed on the jackets, **Volume 1** runs 39 minutes and **Volume 2** runs 43 minutes. Tommy Sands, who has very scary hair, and The Diamonds appear on both releases. **Volume 1** also features The Coasters, Del Shannon, Bryan Hyland, Jive Five, The Tokens and The Dixie Cups. **Volume 2** has Johnny Thunder, Johnny Tillotson, Bobby Vee, The Platters, Ace Cannon and the grasping-at-straws Crickets. Some groups, like the Coasters and the Platters, will legitimately live forever it seems, and there are a few pleasant surprises, such as Tillotson's very sweet and unpretentious rendition of *Earth Angel*, but most of the acts are somewhat akin to Sands' hair, and the impulse is to look away and leave the past to your memories. The full screen color picture is a little soft but workable, while the sound is centered and clear. There is no captioning.

The footage of Vee's two numbers in **Volume 2** is repeated on **Bobby Vee**, an MVD release (UPC#22891660699, \$13), along with the remainder of his 14-minute set. Like Tillotson, he has a reasonably pleasant demeanor, his voice is not completely shot, and he is celebrating the past instead of trying to remain in it. Filling out the DVD is another 12 minutes of songs by another nostalgia band playing the Palace, The Original Juniors.

Without the Vandellas, Martha Reeves is backed by a less dominant duo for an energetic 19-minute set on MVD's **Martha Reeves** (UPC#02289-1660392, \$13), again in front of a dancing audience at the Palace. Her voice is a little deeper and her gyrations are a little slower, but she still has plenty of energy and a solid delivery. Also featured on the program is a nice 12-minute set with Sam Moore.

Similarly, on MVD's **Mary Wells** (UPC#022891660491, \$13), again set at the Palace, Wells' vocals are also a little deeper than they were in the past, and she's more likely to swing her hips than to move her feet, but she has a pleasing 17-minute set that evokes the past but accepts the present. A 12-minute set featuring The Contours and The Crystals rounds out the program.

On all three, the picture and sound are identical to the **Live At** programs.

At least the neon lights are bright

A plot-less Broadway hit in which nine performers take turns singularly and in groups singing close to four-dozen hits by the prolific pop songwriters, Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, **Smoke Joe's Café: The Songs of Leiber and Stoller**, has been released by Broadway Worldwide and Image Entertainment (UPC#014381362725, \$20). While in principle, any show that appears on Broadway is worth preserving on DVD, the lack of stars in the cast reduces the program pretty much to that of a cover band that isn't trying to imitate original recordings. The performers do act out the emotions of the songs, and they all have enough talent to have landed the gig—it surely wasn't handed to them—but the renditions are generally bland, lacking the distinctiveness of the original recordings or the pizzazz that an established star could bring to an alternative interpretation, and there isn't so much a narrative to the program as a sense that some unseen hand is channel surfing. When the show does perk up with a pair of especially energetic deliveries, it turns out to be the finale. Maybe it's better live, but we're glad we avoided those Broadway ticket prices and waited for the DVD.

The picture 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 very crisp and colors are precise. There is a solid 5.1-channel Dolby Digital track and a slightly deeper DTS track. There is no captioning.

Mr. Medley

Andy Williams sings about four dozen songs during the course of the 100-minute program presented on **Andy Williams Live from the Royal Albert Hall 1978**, an RPM Films release (UPC#5013929500358, \$13), and he still has time for several interview segments about his life and career. The way he manages to deliver so many of his hits to his fans is to do medleys, so you get about barely enough of some of the numbers to let them sink in before it is on to the next familiar tune. Generally, it's a good show, but there aren't many opportunities to savor it.

The colors on the full screen picture are a little faded but workable. The sound is centered but adequate. There is no captioning.