

There are five commentaries on **Season Three** and most are stronger than the **Season Two** efforts, with the various creators talking about their production strategies and the contemporary realities that served as the basis for aspects of the show. Richard Price, the novelist whose *Clockers* was a distinct antecedent to **The Wire** and who was pulled in to do a screenplay, talks on the episode he wrote. There are gaps, but he is conscientious about analyzing the creative process and otherwise contemplating aspects of significance within the episode that make the commentary especially worthwhile.

Also featured on **Season Three** is an excellent hour-long Q&A with several members of the cast and crew, and an equally engrossing 27-minute talk by one of the creators, David Simon.

As a warm up for **The Wire**, or the beginning of the learning curve, producer Nina Kostroff Noble and journalists/screenwriters Simon and Ed Burns created a six-part miniseries about the lives of one family coping with Baltimore's urban drug environment, **The Corner**, which is also available from HBO as a two-platter set (UPC#026359908224, \$36). A number of performers who would return in other parts for **The Wire** are also featured in the 2003 production. Each episode runs about 60 minutes and three appear on each platter. There is no 'Play All' function. Because of the urban setting and semi-documentary feel to parts of the show, any compromises to the full screen picture are not noticeable and the transfer looks fine. The stereo surround sound provides touches of dimensionality to the atmosphere. There is an alternate Spanish track and optional English, French and Spanish subtitles.

Based on the real experiences of those living in the neighborhood where it was shot, the show focuses primarily on one disintegrated family, where the mother, an addict, is trying to raise two sons, while the father of one of the sons, also an addict, lives nearby but rarely interacts with them. The lives of the characters they most often come into contact with are also followed. Over the course of the program, which depicts a year or so in their lives, some characters get clean, some fall or fall further into addiction, some die and some are born. The show is not as consummately produced as **The Wire** is. A few of the performances are a little too mannered and unnatural, and the narrative rhythm is a bit too vague, but as the episodes progress, the technical qualities of the series improve noticeably, and it is clear by the time the show reaches its moving ending (where the real people the characters were based upon are introduced to the viewer), the creators were fully ready to go on to greater works. At its best, the program, which was directed by Charles S. Dutton, captures and conveys the emotional reality of drug addiction and its effect on families and communities, with just enough soap opera hooks to make you want to come back for more.

The original mystery-solving monk

We finally got around to watching three episodes of the wonderful 12th Century murder mystery series, **Cadfael**, that we had not previously reviewed. The Acorn Media releases star Derek Jacobi as a worldly monk who solves crimes committed in and around his abbey in the British hinterlands. The mysteries are usually quite good, with decent red herrings, romantic entanglements, psychological complexities and logical motivations, but they are enhanced considerably by the wonderful period detail and well-researched view of how matters of life and death were conducted in the past. And Jacobi is wonderful, as his character must cope with the politics of the abbey and the arcane rules and beliefs of the local constabulary.

Each full screen program runs 75 minutes and is not captioned. The sound is mildly stereophonic and adequately presented. The picture can be a little soft and smeary at times, but is usually workable. The programs are accompanied by cast filmographies, a text profile of author Ellis Peters, and clips of an audio interview with Jacobi that usually run a couple of minutes and reflect aspects of the episode at hand. All three come from the 'first season,' which was initially broadcast in 1994.

The first televised episode, **Cadfael One Corpse Too Many** (UPC#054961659593, \$20), is one of the best, with a terrific mystery. Somebody places a murder victim among scores of soldiers who have been hung for having sided with the wrong king in the local territorial conflicts, and the hero just happens to notice minor discrepancies in the cause of death as he is assisting in the burial of the others. He must first negotiate the delicate political infrastructure to gain permission to investigate the crime and then sort through the few available clues to figure out what happened. The episode also introduces several recurring characters, and there is even an effective action sequence. It's a great way to get into the series.

A goldsmith is knocked out in **Cadfael The Sanctuary Sparrow** (UPC#054961631599, \$20) and a street performer, known to be in conflict with the man, is spotted near the scene of the crime, so a crowd chases him into the abbey, where he must remain until the hero can sort things out. Pretty soon a dead body turns up, and the performer gets blamed for that, too. The tale contains a good romance and the actual killer is cleverly placed as an unlikely suspect.

Abbey politics put the hero in jeopardy in **Cadfael Monk's Hood** (UPC#054961610297, \$20). A wealthy man is poisoned at his dinner table, before he was able to will his lands to the church. The head of the abbey is away, and the resentful substitute doesn't want the hero interfering in the

investigation. The solution is a little more perfunctory than it is in the other two programs, but the extenuating drama and conflict remain highly entertaining.

Eighties variety

There are two highlights to **Best of Barbara Mandrell and the Mandrell Sisters Show**, a Time Life release (UPC#610583339697, \$25). One is a to-be-expected visit by Johnny Cash and June Carter, who are in top form, singing several numbers and joshing with the hosts for an entire program. The other is an appearance by the elderly Bob Hope, in full command of his comic timing and singing a lovely little rendition of *Buttons and Bows*.

The two-platter set features six episodes from the half-hour (26-minute) variety program, originally broadcast in 1980, 1981 and 1982. Mandrell plays the straight smart one, while the other two sisters act dumber in a stereotypical fashion that, like their big hair, seems representative of the Eighties in general. You hear the sounds of an audience but never see them. There are no elaborate sets or enacted comedy sketches, but there are interludes of attempted humor separating the musical numbers, as well as lame appearances by producer Marty Krofft's attempt to compete with the Muppets, the Krofft Puppets. The music is more dependable, although while the program promoted itself as being a 'prime time country-western variety show,' the actual country-western numbers, vying with the standard pop songs, are as middle-of-the-road as they can get.

The full screen picture is a touch soft in places, but colors look reasonably fresh. The monophonic sound is adequate, and there is closed captioning. Other guest performers include John Schneider, Dolly Parton, Marty Robbins, Alabama, Glen Campbell, and Ray Charles.

Centered Laine

Straddling country-western and a straight lounge act, Frankie Laine brought a distinctive baritone voice to pop music that is well represented on the Cherry Red Films release, **Frankie Laine That Lucky Old Sun** (UPC#022891250593, \$13). The 43-minute program features a 1976 concert staged in England, in which Laine's numbers range from *Your Cheatin' Heart* and his signature *Rawhide* to things like the theme from *Love Story*, *Dream a Little Dream of Me*, and the ubiquitous *Feelings*. He is more attentive to the meanings of his lyrics than many singers are and has a pleasing, animated stage manner that underscores how irreplaceable he is. The full screen picture is quite sharp and colors, although a touch pale, are workable. The monophonic sound has clear, smooth tones. There is no captioning.

A tale of two Sixties rock groups

Two successful bands from the Sixties attempt to rekindle their old magic on the Cheery Red Films release, **Blood Sweat & Tears Spinning Wheel** (UPC#5013929935457, \$26), and the Rhino release, **Colin Blunstone Rod Argent of The Zombies Live at the Bloomsbury Theatre, London** (UPC#603497271221, \$20). The one succeeds brilliantly while the other gets little more than points for trying.

Shot in 1980 in England, a while after the band had broken up, the *Blood Sweat & Tears* program depicts one last shot by the lead singer, David Clayton-Thomas, and his fellow musicians, to sustain their past achievements. It is a terrific program, where even the less familiar numbers and jazz improvs are totally captivating, and when the band segues into their best-known numbers, they retain their familiar sound but avoid a precise duplication of their studio recordings. Building a rock sensibility upon an unusually substantial jazz foundation, the lyrics are as intelligent as the musical interludes, creating a sound that is both distinctive and involving, and opening the way to classic cover performances that range from *God Bless the Child* (which itself blossoms, in their interpretation, out of Eric Satie) to *Manic Depression*. And why is it, 40 years on, did we never realize before that *Spinning Wheel* is about a carnival?

The full screen picture has somewhat pale colors and weak details, although the artistry and personalities of the musicians, and Clayton-Thomas in particular, are still discernible. The stereo sound is centered with very mild surround support. The 58-minute program is not captioned.

To be fair, Clayton-Thomas could well have been hobbling about on a cane by the time *The Zombies* returned from the dead for their 2003 concert, which runs 70 minutes. The band members gamely try to relive their past glories, and if you listen with your eyes as well as your ears, and see how much fun they're having, then the indignities they are imposing upon the formerly delicate harmonics of classics like *Time of the Season* and *She's Not There* (and Argent's *Hold Your Head Up*) are excusable and maybe even justifiable. It's pretty much like seeing a lover decades later and trying hard to look through what age has imposed, to grasp and even feel the illusions of memory. Hence, the group is less successful with its less familiar numbers, because with those you are not as likely to swap past for present, and the band's shortcomings become more irritating than engaging.

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 color transfer is sharp and accurate. There is a very crisp DTS track as well as a reasonably strong 5.1-channel Dolby Digital track, although a rougher, less accomplished recording might have sustained the magic a little more readily. There is no captioning.