DVD boxed sets resurrect short-lived TV shows

By Jonathan Taylor, Los Angeles Times | August 19, 2004

"The Simpsons" boxed sets? Sure. "Friends"? Of course. "Sex and the City"? Naturally. TV shows on DVD are the hottest category in the home entertainment business. And that's before the first season of CBS's sturdy hit "Everybody Loves Raymond" lands Sept. 14 and the first three seasons of "Seinfeld" hit the retail market Nov. 23.

In all, the TV-on-DVD business is expected to hit $1.2 billion in revenue this year.

By midyear 2003, there were 153 TV DVD titles available; at midyear this year, that number had risen to 415, according to data compiled by Fox Home Entertainment. Even with the presence of two cable channels devoted solely to repeats, and numerous others that feature a steady diet of older TV, audiences are flocking to their favorite shows on this new technology in ballooning numbers.

But what about NBC's failed comedy "Lateline," a parody of late-night news that featured real Washington politicos in cameos?

When the series netted miserable ratings during its 12-episode life span in 1999, Al Franken -- the show's star, cocreator, and coexecutive producer -- didn't need to be told it wasn't coming back.

"I knew it was done," recalls the comedian, who now hosts a daily talk show on radio network Air America. "I was very mad for a little while. But then I got over it and moved on."

Turns out it wasn't exactly over for "Lateline." On Tuesday, Paramount Home Video is releasing the complete series -- including seven episodes that never aired on NBC -- in a three-disc boxed set.

It's just one example of a surprisingly strong stream of this business: underachieving shows that find new life on DVDs.

Some are shows that faded into network TV memory. Universal has sold more than 150,000 copies, for $119 each, of the 1978-80 series "Battlestar Galactica," which aired just 24 episodes. The first season collection of "Sledge Hammer!," which staggered through a 41-episode run in the late '80s, has sales approaching 100,000 copies, for about $30 each. "Boomtown," which lasted less than two seasons, has been issued in a boxed set.

Coming soon are such short-lived Fox series as "Keen Eddie," "Greg the Bunny," and "Harsh Realm," none of which lasted more than a season.

Other releases are coming for shows that are still on the air but could use a boost. The first season of NBC's "American Dreams," which this season ranks 69th among network prime-time shows, is being released Sept. 7, complete with extended musical performances. (In the show, contemporary artists play '60s performers on "American Bandstand.") And the first season of critically acclaimed but largely unwatched " Arrested Development" is due Oct. 19, just in time to hype the show's second season.

"For shows like 'Arrested Development,' '24,' and even 'The Shield,' they are part of a multiunit initiative," says Steve Feldstein, senior vice president at Fox Home Entertainment. (All three shows are produced and aired by Fox divisions.) "When it comes to us releasing TV DVDs, we're working closely with the network and the production unit. Events are coordinated. It just makes sense."

Comedy Central's "Chappelle's Show," a critical favorite to be sure, is still a show that ranks 581st among cable programs this year. But since it was released in February, "Chappelle's Show -- Season 1 Uncensored" has sold 1.7 million copies; that's more than its average audience.

Thomas Lesinski, president of worldwide home entertainment for Paramount Pictures, which released the
set, said he figured it would do well, given the rave reviews critics have given the sketch comedy show. "Of course, we didn't think it would sell 2 million. No one would've ever predicted that."

Actually, some might have. Because while the all-time best-selling TV collection is the premiere season of "The Simpsons," with more than 2.35 million copies, second on the list is the first season of a far less successful Fox series: "The Family Guy," which sold 1.86 million copies. Its second season sold 1.12 million copies.

That persuaded Fox to order fresh episodes of the animated series for the 2005 season. This for a show that in its first go-round aired fewer than 50 episodes in less than three seasons, ending in February 2002.

This isn't to say that marketing DVDs of less popular or cult shows is the same as what's done for hits such as "CSI" or "Friends." Typically, collections of the underperformers piggyback on more established releases or take advantage of stars' higher profiles.

It may just be network programmers' itchy trigger fingers that spurred this TV-on-DVD torrent. Shows often get pulled off the air just when they're entering the consciousness of many viewers. "Certain shows get a buzz around them," Lesinski says. "Some people don't get to see the first episodes, or they catch it in midseason, second season. They lose continuity and they want to get the whole flavor."

Research by several studios has shown that consumers are drawn to TV DVDs because they're commercial-free, so it's easy to watch as many -- or as few -- episodes as you choose, and because they're a new form of collectible, from the big hits to the cult favorites.

The market for TV shows on DVD caught nearly everyone by surprise, precisely because the shows were already so available.

But Scott Hettrick, editor of DVD Exclusive and Video Business, trade magazines that closely chronicle the DVD realm, notes, "This is all found money. . . . You can spend a few bucks and put it on DVD, and even if you just make $5 million a set, it's $5 million more than you had before."