

## Home Entertainment

DVD/Video

## There's still something about Mary

Set allows fans of Moore's standard-setting show to get in on one gigantic group hug

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When Rhoda Morgenstern spun off from "The Mary Tyler Moore Show" to her own TV series, the show's opening sequence showed her throwing her hat — Mary Richards-style — into the air. It fell into the dirty New York street, where the slightly embarrassed Rhoda fetched it from a gutter. On her spinoff, Phyllis Lindstrom likewise attempted the Mary maneuver, exuberantly flinging her hat skyward in San Francisco, only to see it snatched, in midair, by a gull.

Decade after decade, TV's single career gals have striven toward Marydom. More often than not, they don't make it after all.

Thirty years after the premiere of "The Mary Tyler Moore Show," the comedy series remains in a class of its own, setting the bar just out of reach for each gal-about-town sitcom. A complete set of the show's seven-season run is making its way to DVD, with the debut season being released this past week.

Each glance and every little movement she makes can now be freeze-framed and instant-replayed with digital clarity.

Produced by Ed Asner (who played Mary's boss, Lou Grant), his son Matthew Asner, and Danny Gold, the first season's four-disc box set will be followed by a release of season two, and on and on, until WJM closes its swinging glass doors for the last time — following the gang's memorable group hug toward the box of Kleenex that marked the show's final episode in 1977. TV comedy writing has always been driven by gag quotas. Yet the writers for "The Mary Tyler Moore Show" were always more invested in character development than in sustained laughability.

While the pathologically egocentric characters of "Seinfeld" never grew an emotional inch in nine seasons and the evolution of "Friends" is most noticeable in Rachel's hairstyles, the "Mary Tyler Moore Show" was distinctive in creating comic characters who also grew. Lou Grant separated and divorced, Rhoda put her self-deprecating fat jokes behind her; Ted Baxter eventually learned to pronounce the words "I do." Even the utterly irritating Phyllis and Sue Ann Nivens had their sympathetic moments.

How the writers and actors challenged each other to maintain realistic characters is discussed in the DVD's original documentary, "She Turned the World on With Her Smile: The Making of the Mary Tyler Moore Show," which was directed by Matthew Asner and Danny Gold. The documentary includes interviews with key players who recall the show's conception and gestation and the creators' incorruptible resolve in the face of network brass who preferred easily digestible hijinks. Further, the studio audience initially hated the show, barely laughed, and disapproved of the Jewish, apartment-stealing Rhoda.

With its abundance of interviews, the 88-minute documentary is repetitive. (How many times do we need to hear that the cast and crew felt like one big family?) But those who persevere reap some juicy trivia. Mary Richards as a divorcee? Boob-headed Ted Baxter as her love interest? Hard to believe, but these were some of the original plans for the show.

Other interesting factoids include the revelation that pussycat Gavin MacLeod (Murray Slaughter) had been originally slated to play the growling Lou Grant and that Jennifer Aniston's father, John Aniston, nearly played Ted Baxter. Also of interest: The memorable theme song, "Love Is All Around" was written and performed by one of Buddy Holly's original Crickets, Sonny Curtis.

For mavens of Mary minutiae, the optional audio commentary that accompanies three of the episodes is a must-indulge. It's like kicking back on the sofa with the show's creator (Allan Burns), director (Jay Sandrich) producer (David Davis), and Lou Grant himself as they dish about this take or that line reading — or the fact that the red fox fur seen in the opening montage was dumped after season one, when Tyler Moore went antifur.

But while the commentary for the pilot and for the Emmy-winning "Support Your Local Mother" are essential to MTM enthusiasts, the third episode in which guest star Paul Sand discusses his role as an IRS auditor who has a hefty crush on Mary is less than compulsory viewing.

Instead, it makes one wonder why Ed Asner couldn't round up any other cast members to provide commentary.

While the principal cast is featured in the documentary, the audio that runs with the episodes is a lot more fun. And cuddling on the couch with the voice of Moore herself pointing out insider tidbits would be many people's idea of DVD heaven.

