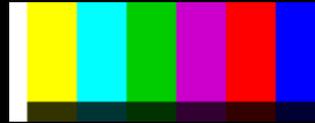


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The Simpsons

"Well, I sense greatness in my family ... it's a greatness that others can't see, but it's there, and if it's not true greatness we have, we're at least average." — Marge Simpson in "There's No Disgrace Like Home"

The Simpsons: The Complete First Season DVD Review

Reviewed by Kay Daly

If you're reading this review, you probably don't need general background on *The Simpsons*. The first family of Springfield inspires a near-rabid following of uber-fans, who memorize every episode and fill conversational pauses with "Remember that time when Homer..."

It's refreshing, then, to cast one's mind back to when *The Simpsons* were just a gamble, a fractured spin-off of a marginally popular variety show on a fledgling network. Premiering on *The Tracey Ullman Show*, the crudely drawn, thinly characterized animated shorts struck a chord with viewers, most likely due to their unvarnished but affectionate view of family life. In the late '80s, the Simpsons were a breath of fresh air in a TV landscape peopled with Huxtables, Keatons, Seavers and Mrs. Garrett.

In response to their overwhelming popularity, Fox took a chance and expanded the shorts into a full 30-minute, prime-time show. This was nearly uncharted territory; with the exception of shows like "The Flintstones" and "The Jetsons," which had been off the evening airwaves since the '60s, there were few full-length animated shows in the prime-time lineup. Veteran TV producer James L. Brooks was tapped to help shepherd the series into being, along with Matt Groening, the creator of the Simpson family (and the underground comic strip "Life In Hell"). A variety of writers and animators joined the team, none of whom had any experience working on a prime-time animated show. The first season was an experiment, and the growing pains (sans Seavers) are apparent throughout.

This DVD set contains the entire first season, 13 episodes, housed on three discs. According to the audio commentary, all shows in the first season were under development simultaneously, so you don't really see a linear progression in technique and characterization over the course

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:: Features ::

Three Discs

Thirteen Episodes (298 mins)

Scene Selection

Audio Commentaries

Never Before Seen Outtakes

"The Making of the Simpsons: America's First Family" Featurette

"Animatic for Bart the Genius" featurette

Foreign Language Clips

Scripts for Three Episodes

season 1

season 2

season 3

of the season. In fact, the show's pilot, a Christmas special entitled "Simpsons Roasting on an Open Fire" (Dec. 17, 1989), is one of the most adeptly executed, and it aired prior to the official premier of the series in January 1990.

From that auspicious opening, what follows is a series of fits and starts, showcasing glimmers of the series' ultimate glory interspersed with stylistic and tonal inconsistencies. An ongoing theme of the audio commentary is "we didn't know what we were doing," and you can see what they mean, especially in terms of the technical details and tone. Character models vary wildly, the animation is wobbly, and the bright colors that later serve as a stylistic signature for the show are even more erratic, bordering on the grotesque.

Just as striking are the variances in pacing, character, and theme. Homer is frequently brutish, not the bumbling, childlike, oddly loveable buffoon he later becomes. Marge is underdeveloped, a frustrated housewife and nothing more. Lisa only occasionally appears as "the smart one"; elsewhere, she's a thinly characterized sidekick, sometimes as bratty as Bart. Bart, the undisputed star of this first season, is also the most fully formed and recognizable to current-day Simpsons fans. At this point, the writers seem to have the best handle on him, and nearly half the episodes serve to showcase his character. These include "Bart the Genius," "Bart the General," "The Telltale Head," "The Crepes of Wrath," "Krusty Gets Busted," and "Some Enchanted Evening."

That said, there is some excellent groundwork laid for all of the characters in this first season. While Bart dominates, each member of the family (except Maggie, the silent infant) takes at least one star turn. In "Homer's Odyssey," we see the title character lose his job then rise to the rank of safety inspector at Mr. Burns' nuclear power plant, while in "Homer's Night Out," he bonds with his son after being caught on film frolicking with an exotic dancer. Marge takes her turn in the spotlight during a high point on the DVD, "Life on the Fast Lane," in which the gravel-voiced matriarch is wooed by a sexy, French-accented bowling instructor, voiced by Albert Brooks. Lisa is highlighted in "Moaning Lisa," a "fervid spectacle of childhood angst" (according to the DVD notes), as she conquers depression by bonding with jazz saxophonist "Bleeding Gums" Murphy.

The better moments also foreshadow the skillful mix of satire and sentimentality that is later to become a distinguishing element of the series. As the creators point out during the audio commentary, the aim was always to balance slapstick comedy with the idea that there is a true and abiding affection in the family. This approach is clear in a Homer-focused episode, "Call of the Simpsons." After a disastrous camping trip, Homer is mistaken for Bigfoot, and scientists conclude, "This specimen is either a below-average human being, or a brilliant beast." In the final pillow talk scene of the episode, Marge kisses her husband in consolation, calling him "My brilliant beast." It's a classic Simpsons moment.

Compared to the rapid pacing of current episodes, these early stories move as slow as molasses. Most shows focus on a single set of actions, and tell their stories in a straightforward

season 4

season 5

fashion, unlike shows in later seasons, which weave two or more story lines and often open with a seemingly unrelated set of circumstances. There's also a more conventional and deliberate comic style in these early shows: you can practically hear the rim shot and cymbal at the end of each scene. Jokes are played big and broad, and there's less of the sly tongue-in-cheek approach that develops later in the series.

Half the fun of watching this sort of collection, though, is seeing what works and what doesn't. In these early episodes, the creative team is still developing the design model for each character, as well as the appropriate tone and animation style. As the creators explain in their audio commentary, they originally adopted a more rubbery, extreme style of animation, but ultimately decided that the Simpsons needed to adhere to the laws of physics and inhabit a quasi-realistic universe. Thus, eccentric movements like the "twister face" (in which a character's head magically contorts as the mouth and forehead twist in opposite directions) appear occasionally in this first season, but are gradually phased out. It's through this trial-and-error that the Simpsons take shape over the course of these 13 episodes.

The three discs are contained in a single three-fold holder imprinted with an amusing introductory letter from Matt Groening. Liner notes summarize each episode and indicate when they first aired. Frequently, the notes inaccurately identify when various characters were first introduced, but they do helpfully list the scenes within the episodes and the overall runtime. Oddly, they do not indicate which episodes are on which disc, which is a strange oversight. The notes also neglect to list the various extra features, most of which appear on disc 3.

The navigation on the three discs is generally straightforward, but riddled with some confusing inconsistencies. Discs 1 and 2 contain six episodes apiece, while disc 3 contains one episode and the "extra features." On each disc, the main menu lists the various episodes, except for disc 3, which also includes a link to "extra features." Disc 1 also includes some "extras," but you'll only find these after you select an episode. Then what you find are scripts to three of the episodes in the series. Each episode on disc 1 links to these extras, even though in most cases, the extras aren't relevant to that particular episode.

Once you click on the episode, you may choose to play the episode, browse the various "chapters" of the episode, choose among language options (English 5.1 Surround, English Dolby Surround, French Dolby Surround) and captions (English, Spanish, none), or view the "extras" (for discs 1 and 3). Oddly, the choice to play the audio commentary is also listed under "Language," not under "Extra Features," so unless you take the time to click the "Language" link, you may miss them (and that would simply be a crime). Disc 3 shows these same navigational inconsistencies. The main level offers you either the episode or the "extras," but if you click on the episode, you'll get the option of "extras" again, which links to the same set of extras promoted on the main menu. Confusing, no?

Video and Audio

In this early stage of the series, the creators had yet to prove themselves, so they probably didn't have the resources — in terms of staff, money and stylistic savvy — to nail a really polished style. That would come later. Still, the quality of the video on the DVD is perfectly fine, and audio is very good, especially during the commentaries.

Extras

This DVD is chock-full of extra features ranging from the ho-hum to the phenomenal. First and foremost are the audio commentaries. Each episode features a different set of commentators, typically comprised of Brooks, Groening, the writer, and/or director. Since the cast of commentators varies from episode to episode, you will hear some anecdotes and insights more than once. Despite that occasional redundancy, the commentary is thoroughly entertaining.

For many of the commentators, this is the first time they've seen these episodes since they first aired; their responses are bemused, mystified, self-deprecating and enlightening. They review technical points, comment on the arc of the series as a whole, discuss larger trends in television, and reveal the origins of many of the running jokes and characters. Groening's input is particularly fascinating; he tends to focus on the tiny details of the animation and design, complimenting a spiffy sight gag or groaning (no pun intended) over a particularly off-model rendering of a character.

Besides all the nifty trivia, the commentators' attention to the technical minutiae reminds the viewer how animation differs from live action. Nothing is accidental in this medium; if a detail appears, it's because someone consciously chose to put it there. Their admiration and self-flagellation over a variety of tiny details inspires a new admiration for the dedication this art form requires.

The extras on disc 1 are less interesting, consisting of copies of the scripts for three episodes. Sure, there are few notations scattered on them, but unless you're a memorabilia junkie, these extras seem like throwaways.

The mother lode of extras housed on disc 3 is immeasurably better. The "Never Before Seen Outtakes" consist of the unfinished first draft of "Some Enchanted Evening," subtitled by the commentators as "the episode that nearly killed the Simpsons." This episode was the first one completed for the entire series, and when it was screened, it was so poorly received by the

network and the creators that the entire series was nearly scrapped. Cooler heads prevailed, and a completely revised version finally aired (this polished version appears on disc 3). These outtakes revel in the badness of Simpsons, version 1. Included are both the episode unembellished, and the outtakes screened with the stunned, aghast commentary of its creators (many of whom haven't seen these clips in more than 13 years). The comments mainly consist of stunned silence, punctuated by a shocked "Oh, my God!" and more articulate statements of horror such as "I feel sorry for us in retrospect" and "This is like self-schadenfreude." The comments peter out as producer James L. Brooks actually flees the viewing room in disgust.

Also delightful are the various foreign language clips, which provide a glimpse of the Simpsons in French, Italian, Spanish, Japanese, and Portuguese. Even if you don't speak the languages, the clips are fun, especially when it comes to comparing how these various cultures translate the voice quality and timbre of each character. (French is eerily similar to the American versions; Spanish transforms Homer into a deep bass and Marge into a rich, gravel-free contralto).

"The Animatic for Bart the Genius" is a nice if all-too-brief review of the transformation of the cartoon from pencil sketch to animated cartoon. In fact, if there's one thing that's missing from this DVD, it's a fuller explanation of the production process for the Simpsons cartoons. This is a particularly glaring omission, since so much of the commentary refers elliptically to the various stages of the process, referring to when things "come back wrong." Their comments are tantalizing, and it would be nice to have some technical back story to fill in the blanks. Ah, well, perhaps on the DVD for season 2...

The extras also include a brief documentary entitled "The Making of the Simpsons: America's First Family." It's a fun, but too brief overview of the creation of this series, including interviews with Groening and Brooks, anecdotes about the characters' genesis, and a very interesting account of the adoption of Simpsons by a wide variety of special-interest groups.

Summary

Groening and company easily could've copped out and given just the first-season episodes on this DVD, counting on Simpson mania to sell copies. They didn't, though, and for that, die-hard fans will be grateful. *The Simpsons: The Complete First Season* is well produced, and filled to the brim with the kind of fun extras that not only entertain, but actually deepen your appreciation of what it took to create this sort of media phenomenon.

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