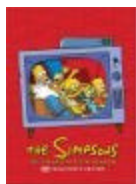
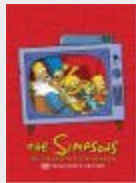


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# The Simpsons

*"Now you can go back to just being you instead of a one-dimensional character with a silly catch phrase." – Lisa Simpson in "Bart Gets Famous"*

*The Simpsons: The Complete Fifth Season DVD Review*

Reviewed by Kay Daly

It was the magical fall of 1993. An FBI agent named "Fox" won the hearts of a nation. A brash young kid named Conan taught us to laugh again. And America's favorite yellow-skinned family hit their 100th-episode.

For many television shows, the 100th show means "the end is in sight." But if TV has taught us anything, it's that the Simpsons rush in where their fleshier counterparts fear to tread. Rather than winding down, in season five, the *Simpsons* crew kicked things up a notch, topping the brilliance of season four with wilder parodies, more improbable celebrity cameos, and deeper emotional impact – and all this despite that fact that nearly the entire writing team from seasons one through four departed just prior to the start of the season.

In the audio commentary, it's suggested that the pressure of staff departures spawned a sort of creative hyper-drive in the fledgling writing team. That may be true, but it's worth noting that the shows of the fifth season are stylistically and thematically consistent with those of the previous season, suggesting that the new staffers were in many ways building on a firm creative foundation.

The season opener, "Homer's Barbershop Quartet," shows the new team working along the same brilliant lines as the original writers. In narrated flashback, we learn about the B-Sharps, Homer's oddly forgotten Grammy-winning barbershop quartet. The story of the band's rise to fame and eventual break-up offers a sly parody of the Beatles, complete with Police Chief Wiggum as the "lost" Beatle Pete Best (he's ditched in the woods like an unwanted pooch). From the marvelous '80s-inspired barbershop hit "Baby on Board" to the image of the B-Sharps reuniting for a final rooftop concert, this parody hits all the right notes, and even includes a cameo by former Beatle, the late George Harrison ("It's been done," he sniffs in response to

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## :: Features ::

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Language Selection

Audio Commentary on Each Episode

"A Word from Matt Groening"

Animation Showcase

Animatic

Illustrated Commentary

Commercials

Original Sketches

Audio Outtake

"A Look Back with James L. Brooks"

Special Language Feature

the rooftop serenade).

This first episode is a harbinger of things to come. Throughout the season, the show's classic stylistic elements start to gel, such as the "non-sequitur opening" in which the main story sneaks in by way of a convoluted chain of events. An example is the opening scenes of "Marge on the Lam," which depict Homer getting both arms simultaneously trapped in two vending machines as an improbable lead-in to Marge's budding friendship with her new neighbor, Ruth Powers. (The audio commentary notes that these introductory flights of fancy are increasingly less possible, since the current team has lost approximately two minutes per episode to longer commercial breaks. A sad loss indeed.)

The use of parody – seen in earlier seasons – also goes into overdrive in season five, getting deeper, more sophisticated, and more pervasive. Here, the parodic elements go beyond incidental references to shape all aspects of production, including camera angles, lighting, scoring, and writing style. Throughout the season, the episodes allude to a huge range of classic films and television shows, from snapshot references (*Animal House* and *Revenge of the Nerds* in "Homer Goes to College"; *The Right Stuff*, *The Beverly Hillbillies*, *Planet of the Apes*, and *2001: A Space Odyssey* in "Deep Space Homer"; *The Graduate* in "Lady Bouvier's Lover") to fully fleshed tributes (*Citizen Kane* in "Rosebud," *Thelma and Louise* in "Marge on the Lam," *Cape Fear* in "Cape Feare").

And just when you think the *Simpsons'* creators have taken parody as far as it can go, they air an episode like "Boy-Scoutz 'N the Hood," in which Bart joins the Junior Campers and embarks on a father-and-son rafting trip with guest star Ernest Borgnine (!). The writers cram the 22-minute episode with allusions to movie genres including disaster movies (Apu struggling to bring forth an all-syrup Squishy), Broadway musicals (the hallucinatory "Springfield, Springfield" musical montage), adventure-suspense (a momentary glimpse of *Deliverance*), and classic teen horror (an homage to *Friday the 13th* in the final moments of the episode).

The use of music in season five is similarly over-the-top. From Sideshow Bob's fully staged performance of *HMS Pinafore* ("Cape Feare") to Apu's anthem "Who Needs the Kwik-E-Mart" ("Homer and Apu") to Bart's parody of "Can't Touch This" ("Bart Gets Famous"), Springfield proves to be a truly tuneful burg. Add to that musical inclusions of various guest stars – The Ramones playing Mr. Burns' birthday party ("Rosebud"), James Brown getting funky in front of a brass band ("Bart's Inner Child"), and James Taylor serenading a rocket-full of presumably doomed astronauts ("Deep Space Homer").

Season five also plays host to fresh new batch of celebrity guest stars, some playing themselves, others creating workaday Springfieldians. In addition to the aforementioned Harrison and Borgnine, the roster includes David Crosby, Kelsey Grammer (in the recurring role of Sideshow Bob), Phil Hartman, Albert Brooks, Michelle Pfeiffer, Werner Klemperer (reviving his classic performance of Colonel Klink of *Hogan's Heroes* fame), Gerry Cooney, Robert Goulet, Sam Neill, James Woods, Kathleen Turner, Conan O'Brien, and Buzz Aldrin.

season 1

season 2

season 3

season 4

season 5

But season five isn't all parodic in-jokes, celebrities, and musical interludes. Even as the show gets more, well, cartoonish, it goes deeper in terms of character development. The writers occasionally shift their attention away from the main cast to dedicate entire episodes to secondary characters. Thus, in "Homer and Apu," we watch the proprietor of the Kwik-E-Mart embark on a physical and spiritual journey to redemption, and in "Rosebud," we glimpse a soft spot in Mr. Burns habitually cold and detached exterior (even if it goes only so far as his love for a ragged teddy bear).

The creative team also adds dimension to their rendition of the Simpson family. In "Marge on the Lam," we see more of Marge's frustration in her marriage, and watch her go – for once – outside the family circle for fulfillment. In "Lady Bouvier's Lover," Grandpa Simpson finds love with Marge's mother, and in "Homer Loves Flanders," Homer takes an about-turn and learns to appreciate his neighbor and nemesis, Ned (even as Ned finds Homer's newfound affection unbearable).

The greatest foray into emotional resonance, however, occurs in perhaps the season's finest episode, "The Last Temptation of Homer." In this episode, Homer finds himself deeply attracted to his new co-worker, Mindy (voiced by Michelle Pfeiffer). It's a portrait of good people trying to deny their undeniable urges. Even though the two share a physical and mental connection (Homer is dismayed to find that Mindy loves football, beer, and chili dogs), they withstand temptation, and Homer returns to his first love, Marge.

Particularly touching is the rendition of Mindy, which avoids the clichéd seductress for a more full-bodied and feeling human being. Like Homer, Mindy is upset by the attraction and tries to resist. While traveling on business, the two win a dinner at "The Sexiest Restaurant in Capital City," and Homer receives a fortune cookie with a message that, to him, seals his doom: "You will find happiness with a true love."

Back at the hotel, Homer and Mindy come to terms with their attraction in one of the funniest and most touching exchanges of dialogue from the season:

**Mindy:** What's wrong?

**Homer:** Oh, yeah, like you don't know. *[weeping]* We're gonna have sex!

**Mindy:** Oh...well, we don't have to.

**Homer:** *[sad]* Yes we do! The cookie told me so.

**Mindy:** Well...desserts aren't always right.

**Homer:** But they're so sweet!

The small scene is remarkably affecting, true-to-character, and hilarious at the same time.

And if that weren't enough, the season also includes the first appearance of Cletus, the slack-jawed yokel; the one-eyebrowed baby (Maggie's nemesis); Luigi (owner of the local Italian

restaurant); and one of the all-time best lines of dialogue on network television: "Godspeed, little doodle."

The 22 episodes are presented in a four-disc set, appropriately decorated with images and characters from the season. The liner notes are very detailed, providing episode synopses, running time, air date, and scene selections and extras for each episode. The navigation is better than some of the earlier seasons, though there are still some bugs. Most glaringly, the instructions for accessing the various embedded features are maddeningly slight. It's only after viewing nearly all the episodes that one has gotten the hang of the system.

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## Video and Audio

The quality of video and audio are good. The one noticeable problem is the sound level on the commentaries. When the audio commentaries are running, it is nigh unto impossible to hear any of the dialogue, which is played whisper-quiet. This is especially maddening when the commentators note a particular line reading or turn of phrase – which, of course, the viewer can't hear. At one point, I accidentally activated captions for the dialogue, which was a fantastic solution – and if I ever figure out how to do it again, I'll let you know.

The audio is available in English 5.1 Surround, French stereo, and Spanish stereo for all episodes, and in a "Special Language Feature," one episode can also be viewed dubbed in more "exotic" languages, such as Hungarian and Italian. As Homer would say, "It's funny because they talk different than I do."

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## Extras

As in previous *Simpsons* DVDs, the slate of extras is full-to-overflowing. Each disc has a link to a menu of extras for the episodes on the disc. Additionally, there is a menu of relevant extras (commentary, deletions, animated features, etc.) accessible from the main menu for each episode. The extras menus also include features not associated with a single episode, such as commercials, featurettes, and a compilation of deleted scenes from the entire season.

The season is book-ended by "A Word from Matt Groening" (disc 1) and a featurette entitled "A Look Back with James L. Brooks" (disc 4). Both are pleasant and convey the personalities of these two creative execs, if not superabundant with actual information.

Each episode includes an optional audio commentary by an ever-shifting cast of creatives, including Matt Groening, various directors, producers, writers, and actors (it's particularly nice to hear from Yeardley Smith, who voices Lisa). The quality of the commentaries is variable. In general, they are far less detailed and technical than the commentaries for season one. There are fewer comments on the techniques and process behind particular scenes, and much more discussion of the context of the creation of each episode – the impetus for writing each story, allusions to struggles for control with Fox Network, comments on how episodes were marketed, occasional discussions of sources for various characters. (Who knew Moe was inspired by Al Pacino in *Dog Day Afternoon*?)

There are, however, some satisfying insights into the directorial and acting choices. Throughout, the writers, directors and producers call attention to the dramatic range of the voice actors, noting, for example, that Dan Castellanata voices both Homer and the Squeaky-Voiced Teen, among numerous other characters.

Unfortunately, many of the commentaries devolve into a recitation of "typical" *Simpsons* creative choices and discourses on the philosophy behind the series' style. These comments are interesting, but would have been better amassed in a single featurette rather than sprinkled throughout the commentary. They're too generic to shed real light on the episode at hand.

Most disappointing are the commentaries that include Conan O'Brien. During season five, O'Brien left the *Simpsons* writing team to take over David Letterman's spot on the popular talk show *Late Night*. Clearly, this was a signal moment for the *Simpsons* team. Apparently, whenever Conan is in the room, they can speak of nothing else.

Other features include detailed samples of the animation process for five of the episodes, such as storyboards, original sketches, illustrated commentary, and a full animation showcase. In the latter, storyboards, animatics, and the final episode are shown simultaneously through a picture-in-picture presentation. It's an intriguing and enlightening peek into the complexities of production.

The discs also include deleted scenes, commercials, and an audio outtake. Some of these features are both amassed in the "extras" section and interspersed at appropriate points in the episodes. On-screen prompts (a scissors icon for deleted scenes, an ear icon for the audio outtake) allow diehard fans to access the features without leaving the episode, a nice mechanical trick.

Finally, while the menus themselves don't typically count as extras, on this DVD they should. Each menu – disc main menus, episode main menus, extra menus – are programmed with animated presentations. At the main menu level, each disc shows a "typical" *Simpsons*' scene: Bart's bedroom, Mrs. Krabapple's classroom, the Kwik-E-Mart, Homer's workstation. A single character remains on screen, intermittently interacting with characters and props from the

episodes on the disc. Additionally, there are easter eggs hidden in each scenario. See if you can find them!

Similarly, the main menu for each episode presents a "couch gag" like the ones that play at the end of the opening titles of each episode. The gags generally allude in some way to the episode, and some are laugh-out-loud funny.

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## Summary

Even if *The Simpsons: The Complete Fifth Season* came with no extras, it would be worth the purchase. The episodes are truly wonderful – not a clinker in the bunch – and while the commentaries are inconsistent, they offer enough amusing nuggets to make them worthwhile. The additional features round out the experience provide the kind of insider's view you expect when you make an investment in television history.

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