

DVD Select: Billy Bob has the right stuff in 'The Astronaut Farmer'

by *Robert_J_Hawkins*

A man's gotta dream. Only, Charlie Farmer's dreams are just a bit bigger and crazier than most. The Texas cattle rancher wants to build a rocket ship and blast himself into outer space - and orbit the Earth at least once.

That's the story behind the often charming and entertaining family film "The Astronaut Farmer" (Warner Bros., 2 1/2 stars).

'THE ASTRONAUT FARMER' - Billy Bob Thornton stars as Charlie Farmer in the family adventure film 'The Astronaut Farmer.' CNS Photo courtesy of Warner Bros. Charlie (Billy Bob Thornton) is in a better position than most to reach for the stars. He's a former astronaut-in-training who left the program to deal with a family tragedy. He's a certified genius, an engineer by training - and he has access to a junkyard full of discarded NASA rocket ship parts with which to build his dream.

And so, inside his barn, with the help of his teenage son (Max Thieriot), a couple of button-cute little daughters, his aging father-in-law (Bruce Dern) and an unrealistically loving and supportive (what the heck, and good looking, too) wife (Virginia Madsen) a Mercury-era rocket takes shape.

DVD RATINGS

4 stars: Don't miss: rent it/buy it

3 stars: Worth the risk: rent it

2 stars: On the tipping point: if nothing else is available

1 star: Don't bother: wait until it's in the \$1 bin The real space race begins when Charlie tries to buy 10,000 pounds of rocket fuel on the Internet. That's when the weight of the entire U.S. government and its Homeland Security resources comes down on his head and the Farmer Space Project. There's no mistaking who the bad guys are here - the government shows up in a long string of black SUV's, wearing dark aviator-style sunglasses, bad haircuts, squirrely moustaches and white shirts. They're also either inept, clownish, vain or venal - pick your government bureaucrat.

The truth is, on one level, "Astronaut Farmer" is a hearty Libertarian manifesto about the little guy from Texas who is thwarted from doing whatever he wants to do by Big Government.

A swarm of Big Government acronyms descend on Farmer's launch pad - FAA, FBI, CIA, NASA, CPS (Child Protective Services) - in their role as "the dream police." In turn, Farmer's friends turn to another powerful set of acronyms to achieve a balance of power and detente: CNN, FOX, ABC, NYT, CBS, NBC and probably MTV among others.

So, this is fun for a while, watching the little guy take on the world to achieve his dream. But while the ordinary man's dream is for a decent credit score and enough money to pay next month's mortgage, Charlie's dream puts his family \$600,000 in debt, on the edge of foreclosure, and his kids at risk of being taken away by child protective services.

Farmer yanks his kids out of school to help build his rocket with the declaration to one teacher: "Mrs. Graham, you're just teaching him how to read history, I'm going to show him how to make it."

That's cool But I was wondering, what if every Libertarian in Texas decided to build a rocket and shoot himself or herself into space? Sure, you could argue, this might be a better world - but even Farmer's rocket fails the first time and almost wipes out the entire encampment of television media. (OK, again, you say, possibly leading to a better world.)

Imagine hundreds of independent-thinking individuals sending up rockets where ever and whenever they

want - and I'm not just talking about in Baghdad. I wouldn't want the individual dreams of hundreds of freedom-loving Libertarians raining down on my head.

But Charlie Farmer's dream I can get behind for 90 minutes or so, even when Bruce Willis shows up as a former astronaut who tries to talk Charlie out of his dream. He doesn't.

My advice, get "The Astronaut Farmer" for its family entertainment value but then figure out your own dream and follow it.

ALSO THIS WEEK

"Sweet Land" (Fox, 3 stars) Co-existing in a rigid society is an underlying theme in this romantic tale set in the 1920s American Midwest. Inge, a German bride, arrives in a small Minnesota farming community but her heritage and lack of proper papers make her the object of suspicion in the closed Norwegian society. She and her intended, Olaf, are forbidden to marry by the minister but despite the disapproval of the community they still fall in love. When a banker tries to foreclose on the farm of a friend, Olaf and Inge take a stand and the community rallies around them simultaneously taking Inge into their hearts. A quiet, well-told tale.

"The Last Mimzy" (New Line/Infinifilm, 2 1/2 stars) When young siblings Emma and Noah Wilder (Rhiannon Leigh Wryn and Chris O'Neil) discover a box of mysterious toys they think they're in for a day of fun, but they are soon off on a magical adventure that will change the world. Based on Lewis Padgett's short story "Mimsy Were the Borogoves," the family adventure fantasy also stars Timothy Hutton, Joely Richardson, Rainn Wilson and Michael Clarke Duncan.

More from this week: Michael Keaton, Brendan Fraser and Amber Valletta are caught up in a love triangle in the black comedy "The Last Time" (Sony). Wesley Snipes is armed to the teeth and ready to finish the job in the action film "The Contractor" (Sony). Rupert Grint gets top billing in this 2002 movie about a young boy (Bruce Cook) who uses his flatulence to save the world in "Thunderpants" (Genius). Revenge in the world of classical piano performers fuels the French psychological thriller "The Page Turner" (Tartan).

"You're Gonna Miss Me" (Palm, not rated) Roky Erickson was on a meteoric rise in the rock world of the 1960s. Specifically, the "psychedelic rock" world. That was his phrase. He coined it. He defined it through his band The 13th Floor Elevators and he informed it through prodigious intake of psychedelics. This documentary finds him at age 53, a man who "sleeps to the melody of four radios, three televisions, two amps a radio scanner and a Casio keyboard, all playing at he same time." He battles schizophrenia and has spent time in a hospital for the criminally insane.

IT CAME FROM TV

Those grifters for good return for season three of "Hustle" from BBC Video; season two of "Beauty and the Beast" revives the excuse for women everywhere to break open a pint of chocolate chip mint ice cream and cuddling up to the screen in your jammies; Paris Hiltons in-training throw fits on the MTV reality show "My Super Sweet 16" seasons 1 and 2; also the recently aired "My Super Sweet 16: The Movie"; season two of the HBO comedy about those who rarely get credit, "Extras".

"Home Run Derby: Volume 1" (MGM) Back in 1959, this television show aired from Wrigley Field in Chicago and included some baseball going head to head for nine innings, swinging for the fences. Among the matchups in this premiere season: Mickey Mantle vs. Willie Mays, then Ernie Banks, then Jackie Jensen. Finally Harmon Killebrew would take Mantle down. Other contestants include Ken Boyer, Hank Aaron and Jim Lemon. Volume 2 (Aaron, Wally Post, Frank Robinson and more) debuts Aug. 14. Volume 3 (Bob Allison, Killebrew, Mays, Lemon, Gil Hodges and more) debuts Sept. 25.

"24 x 24: Wide Open with Jeff Gordon" (Lionsgate) This look at the life of NASCAR driver Jeff Gordon debuted only days ago on the TNT cable channel. With four NASCAR Cup Series Championships, three Daytona 500 wins and four Brickyard 400 wins under his tires, Gordon is one of the premiere racers on the circuit.

FROM THE VAULTS

MGM unleashes a quartet of film noir classics: Director Fritz Lang's "The Woman in the Window," starring Edward G. Robinson and Joan Bennett; Robinson enters a cat-and-mouse game with gangster George Raft in "A Bullet for Joey"; it's Robinson yet again as a war crimes investigator in pursuit of Orson Welles in "The Stranger"; and John Payne is an ex-GI framed for the bad deeds of Lee Van Cleef in "Kansas City Confidential."

Nothing says summer love on the beach like the teensploitation fluff of "The Frankie and Annette Collection" (MGM) - movies so bad and cheap and innocent, they're actually fun to watch. Some of these titles shift from the beach to the race track and ski slopes but the spirit is always the same. The eight films in this box set are "Beach Blanket Bingo," "How to Stuff a Wild Bikini," "Muscle Beach Party," "Beach Party," "Bikini Beach," "Fireball 500," "Thunder Alley" and "Ski Party."

"Follow Along DVD" (MGM/Fox) The studios have combined to bring out a handful of kid-oriented titles with captioning especially geared to encourage reading along while watching the movie - hopefully improving reading and vocabulary skills for your boob-tubed darlings. The titles in the first wave are "Anastasia," "Ferngully: The Last Rainforest," "Garfield The Movie," "Good Boy!," "Ice Age," "Miss Spider's Sunny Patch Kids," "Robots," "The Sandlot," "Stellaluna" and "Thumbelina." Each is priced under \$15.

"Joan Collins Superstar Collection" (Fox) Before "Dynasty" turned Joan Collins into a cruel cartoon, she was a working girl making entertaining if modestly envisioned movies. This collection of five films spans her "golden years," 1955 to 1960: "The Girl On the Red Velvet Swing" (1955); "Sea Wife" (1957); "Stopover Tokyo" (1957); "Rally 'Round the Flag, Boys!" (1958); and "Seven Thieves" (1960).

"The Film Crew: Hollywood After Dark" (Shout!) From the same crew that gave us 11 years of smarmy cracks over the top of really bad movies in TV's, "Mystery Science Theater 3000," comes a new series of B-films to be skewered. First up is "Hollywood After Dark" (1968) in which a failed actor finds salvation in a big, um, hearted stripper (Rue McClannahan of "Golden Girls"). Next victim, on Aug. 7, is "Killers from Space."

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