

Cites & Insights

Crawford at Large/Online Edition

Libraries • Policy • Technology • Media

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The Front

Starting the Volume

Volume 16? With only ten issues left to go to hit #200? (That's not true: there's at least one phantom issue, now available only in the C&I annual paperbacks, that isn't counted in the running total.)

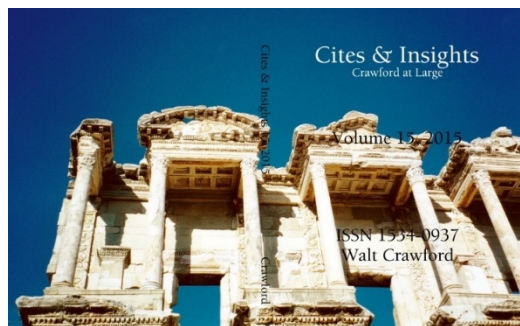
Year beginnings are traditional times to take stock of how it's going and propose ~~resolutions~~ intentions for the new year. Of course, this essay isn't being written in the new year; the first draft is being written in late November 2015, and I'll touch it up just before publishing the issue. So I won't discuss ongoing readership patterns (if I do that, it's usually in the February issue), but I will offer a few notes.

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First, the books.

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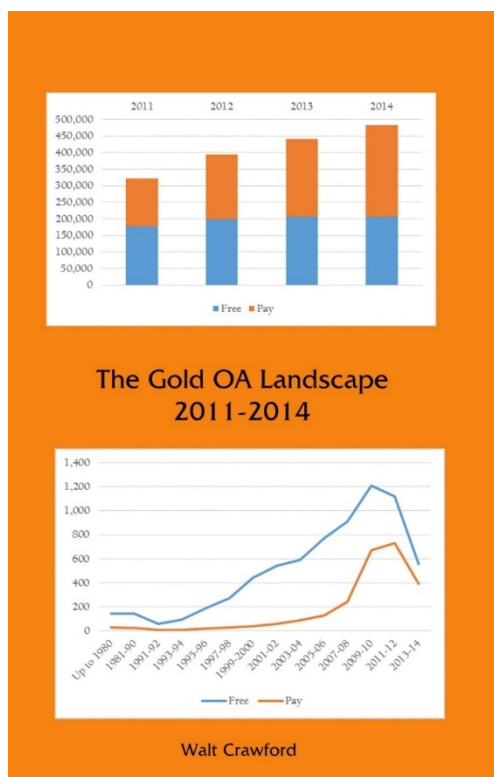
The paperback edition of [Cites & Insights, volume 15, 2015](#), is 354 pages long, including table of contents, 11 issues, and two indices that only

appear in the book. As always, it's 8.5" x 11" and printed on 60# white paper; it's a handsome book. The price is \$45; roughly half of that goes to support C&I and open access research. Highlights include:

- Three full-issue essays related to Open Access: Economics, The Gold OA Landscape 2011-2014, and Ethics
- A fair use trilogy: Google Books, HathiTrust and miscellaneous fair-use topics
- More pieces of the OA puzzle, mostly leading up to The Gold OA Landscape
- The usual: Deathwatch, Ebooks & Pbooks; a eulogy to FriendFeed and some notes on Twitter; and more

The cover picture is, as always, taken by my wife (Linda Driver, the librarian and photographer in the household) during our travels—in this case, the library at Ephesus.

The Gold OA Landscape 2011-2014



I may have mentioned this before, just possibly—but didn't include the cover shot previously. (Only the front cover: the back is just OA Gold apart from the ISBN—and yes, this one *does* have an ISBN and is available

through Amazon, Ingram and Barnes & Noble, although I get three times as much net revenue if you buy it [directly from Lulu](#)).

[The paperback](#) is \$60 (or less with occasional discounts; I think B&N and Amazon are both selling it for \$53 at the moment). There's also a [site-licensed PDF ebook version](#) for \$55, only available from Lulu (apparently the other vendors won't accept PDFs, and my attempt to turn this into an ePub resulted in a pretty sad ePub, largely because of all the tables and graphs). When I say "site-licensed," I mean that the copyright statement clearly says an institution can make the PDF available to its users within one site (that is, a campus or equivalent) without regard to how many use it at any one time.

Sales of this book are one way to show that this kind of research—fully examining actual open access publishing figures—is worthwhile. (Direct payment to keep it going would be another way.) I've already stated revenue milestones at which the underlying data will be posted to figshare, at which I'll start another round (2011-2015), and—the ideal—at which the 2011-2015 version would be available as a *free* PDF. It's fair to say we're nowhere near any milestone at this point: at this writing, a dozen copies have been sold, but I'm also counting other Lulu book sales since 9/1/15, so the total net revenue's just over \$500. That's one-third of the way toward making the underlying data available on figshare. Look to [Walt at Random](#) for occasional updates on those figures.

Plans for the Year

Very much up in the air, partly because so much depends on whether there's funding to continue the gold OA research. I'd love to do it: I think it's valuable and I believe it can only be done manually, at least so far. But "I think it's valuable" is not the same as "it's demonstrably valuable, such that the community recognizes its value."

If that does prove to be the case—if I do the 2015 scan—then while there may be some slender issues of *Cites & Insights* and maybe one or two skipped months, I'll be working with enthusiasm that will show up in what I do here.

If it doesn't, that doesn't necessarily mean beefier or better *Cites & Insights*. It could mean I'll go in some other direction (or find a way to sponsor the research that does *not* yield freely available outcomes). It could mean I'll recognize that I'm, you know, *old* and devote more time to reading and less to writing and research. I just don't know.

Currently, my target for C&I is the same as it has been for most years: a total of 240 pages for the year, with a maximum of 300. My aim has traditionally been bad: I've never managed to keep a year's output down to 240 pages (that is, 12 20-page issues), and the only year after 2003 that it's been under 300 pages was 2011, the year *Cites & Insights* very nearly disappeared.

Specific plans? There will be an essay on access and economics, probably a full issues unless it's split across two issues. There will probably be essays on ebooks, books, magazines and possibly other media. Probably something copyright-related and some tech-related stuff. Beyond that: who knows?

In the meantime, if you know of a center or a group or a foundation or...that finds my OA research sufficiently worthwhile to provide fairly modest funding to keep it going for one more year, please put them in touch: waltercrawford@gmail.com

Intersections

PPPPredatory Article Counts: An Investigation

If you read all the way through the December 2015 essay [ETHICS AND ACCESS 2015](#) (and if you didn't, you should!), you may remember a trio of items in The Lists! section relating to [“‘Predatory’ open access: a longitudinal study of article volumes and market characteristics”](#) (by Cenyu Shen and Bo-Christer Björk in *BMC Medicine*). Briefly, the two scholars took Beall's lists, looked at 613 journals out of nearly 12,000, and concluded that “predatory” journals published 420,000 articles in 2014, a “stunning” increase from 50,000 articles in 2010—and that there were around 8,000 “active” journals that seemed to meet Jeffrey Beall's criteria for being PPPPredatory (I'm using the short form).

I was indeed stunned by the article—because I had completed a *complete* survey of the Beall lists and found far fewer articles: less than half as many. I also didn't think there were anywhere near 8,000 active journals either—if “active” means “actually publishing Gold OA articles” I'd put the number at roughly half that.

The authors admitted that the article estimate was just that, an estimate, and that it could be off by as much as 90,000. Of course, news reports didn't focus on that: they focused on the Big Number.

Lars Bjørnshauge at *DOAJ* questioned the numbers and, in commenting on one report, quoted some of my own work. I looked at that work more carefully and concluded that a good estimate for 2014 was around 135,000 articles, or less than one-third of the Shen/Björk number. My estimate was based on a nearly 100% actual count, not an estimate from around 6% of the journals.

As you may also remember, Björk dismissed these full-survey numbers with this statement:

“Our research has been carefully done using standard scientific techniques and has been peer reviewed by three substance editors and a

statistical editor. We have no wish to engage in a possibly heated discussion within the OA community, particularly around the controversial subject of Beall's list. Others are free to comment on our article and publish alternative results, we have explained our methods and reasoning quite carefully in the article itself and leave it there."

I found that response unsatisfying (and suspect that I'll approach Björk's work with a more jaundiced eye in the future). The small-sample report continued (continues?) to get wider publicity, while my near-complete survey got very little.

The situation continued to bother me, because I don't doubt that the authors *did* follow appropriate methodology and wonder how the results could be so wrong. How could they come up with more than twice as many active OA PPPredatory journals and more than *three times* as many articles?

I thought I'd look at my own work a little more carefully to see whether sampling could account for the wild deviation.

First Attempt: The Trimmed List

I began by taking my own copy of [Crawford, Walt \(2015\): Open Access Journals 2014, Beall-list \(not in DOAJ\) subset. figshare](#). The keys on each row of that 6,948-row spreadsheet are designed to be random. The spreadsheet includes not only the active Gold OA journals but also 3,673 others, to wit:

- 2,045 that had not published any articles between 2011 and 2014, including eight that had explicitly ceased.
- 183 that were hybrid journals, not gold OA.
- 413 that weren't really OA by my standards.
- 279 that were difficult to count (more on those later).
- 753 that were either unreachable or wholly unworkable.

There were two additional exclusions: I deleted around 1,100 journals (at least 300 of them empty) from publishers that don't provide hyperlinked lists of their journal titles—and I deleted journals that are in *DOAJ* because there were even more reasons than usual to doubt the PPPredatory label. (The biggest group of journals in that double-listed category, MDPI, has recently been removed from Beall's list.)

I wound up with 3,275 active gold OA journals, what I'll call "secondary OA journals," since I think of the *DOAJ* members as "serious OA journals" and don't have a good alternative term. ("Questionable" is a reasonable term, I guess.)

As I started reworking the numbers, I thought there should be some accounting for the opaque publishers and journals. In practice, I knew from extended sampling that most journals from opaque publishers were either empty or very small—and my sense is that most opaque journals

(usually opaque because there are no online tables of contents, only downloadable PDF issues, but sometimes because there really aren't streams of articles as such) are also fairly small. But still, they should be included. Since these two groups (excluding the 300-odd journals from opaque publishers that I *knew* were empty) added up to 32% of the count of active journals, I multiplied article and revenue counts by 1.32. I think this is too high, but feel it's better to err on the side that will get closer to the Shen/Björk numbers.

I did *not* factor in DOAJ-included numbers, but the total of those and other already-counted additional articles (doubling 2014 since I only counted January-June) is around 43,000 for 2014; around 39,000 for 2013; around 37,000 for 2012; and around 28,000 for 2011. You can add them to the counts below if you wish—although I don't believe these represent articles from questionable publishers.

Methodology

Since 613 was the sample size in the Shen/Björk article, I took a similar size sample as a starting point, then adjusted it so I could take five samples that would, among them, include everything: that is, a sample size of 655 journals.

For each sample, I took the article count for each year, multiplying by appropriate factors, and the revenue counts for 2013 and 2014. I calculated average APC per article for 2014 and 2013 by straight division—and also calculated the average article count (*not* including zero-count journals because the cells were blank rather than zero) and median article count (also excluding zero-count journals). I also calculated standard deviation just for amusement.

“Zero-count journals? Didn't you eliminate zero-count journals?” I eliminated journals that had no articles in any year 2011-2014, but quite a few journals have articles in some years and not in others—including newish journals. There were only 2,393 journals with articles in the first half of 2014; 2,714 in 2013; 1,557 in 2012 and 996 in 2011.

I also calculated the same figures for the full set.

Looking at the results, I was a little startled by the wide range, given that these samples were 20% of the whole: the 2014 projected article totals (doubling actual article counts, of course) ranged from 5,755 to 180,229! Even that highest count is still much less than half of the Shen/Björk count—and just a bit over half if you add in the DOAJ-listed count.

So I added another column and assigned a random number to each row, using Excel's RAND function, then froze the results and took a new set of five samples. The results were much narrower in range: 99,713 to 136,660. The actual total: 121,311 (including the 1.32 multiplier but not DOAJ numbers).

Table 1 shows the projected (or actual, shown as “Total”) article totals year-by-year and sample-by-sample, sorted so the lowest 2014 projection

appears first. Samples 1-5 use the assigned pseudorandom keys, while samples 6-10 use the Excel RAND function for randomization. Clearly, the latter yields more plausible, more closely clustered results.

Sample	2014	2013	2012	2011
4	5,755	21,734	15,959	10,223
5	91,067	85,734	66,594	51,473
8	99,713	84,797	55,209	33,733
7	115,368	91,964	57,664	27,595
Total	121,311	99,994	64,325	34,543
6	123,050	104,808	57,295	22,605
9	131,762	106,181	82,790	53,869
10	136,660	112,220	68,666	34,914
3	159,284	121,097	75,933	27,628
1	170,148	138,890	87,371	56,027
2	180,299	132,515	75,768	27,364

Table 1. Estimated article counts by year

Adding the 43,000-odd articles from DOAJ-listed journals would bring these totals (ignoring samples 1-5) to around 143,000 to around 180,000 articles, with the most likely value around 165,000 articles: more than one-third of the Shen/Björk estimate but a *lot* less than half.

Note that “120,000 plus or minus 25,000” as an estimate actually covers all five samples that used the RAND-function randomization. Figure 1 shows the same data as Table 1, but in graphic form.

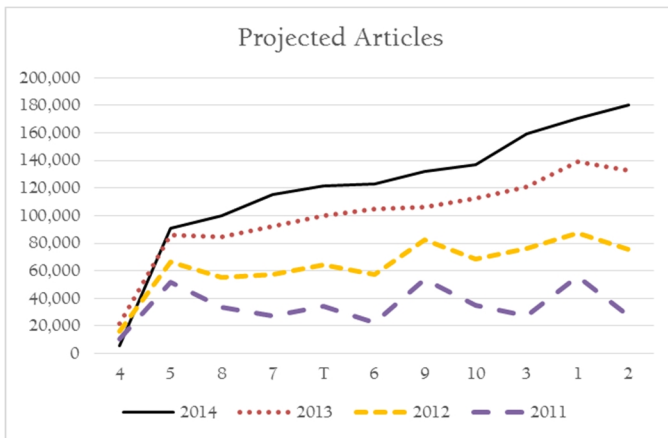


Figure 1. Estimated article counts by year

How much revenue might those articles have brought in, and what’s the APC per article? Keeping the order of samples the same as for Table 1

and Figure 1, Table 2 and Figure 2 show the maximum revenue (not allowing for waivers and discounts).

Sample	2014	2013
4	\$2,952,893	\$10,473,269
5	\$1,677,496	\$3,322,988
8	\$30,184,480	\$23,906,771
7	\$35,939,416	\$35,825,909
Total	\$31,863,087	\$28,537,554
6	\$31,010,206	\$27,926,897
9	\$31,165,754	\$29,071,218
10	\$31,015,578	\$25,956,975
3	\$82,610,167	\$65,930,614
1	\$34,247,360	\$32,892,328
2	\$37,827,517	\$30,068,570

Table 2. Estimated maximum revenue, 2014 and 2013

This time there are *two* extremely low figures and one extremely high figure—with samples 6 through 10 all within \$4.1 million of the actual maximum figure (for 2014: for 2013, the deviation is \$7.3 million). Compare the \$31.86 million calculated costs here with the \$74 million estimated by Shen/Björk: the full-survey number is less than half as much.

Figure 2 shows the same information in graphical form.

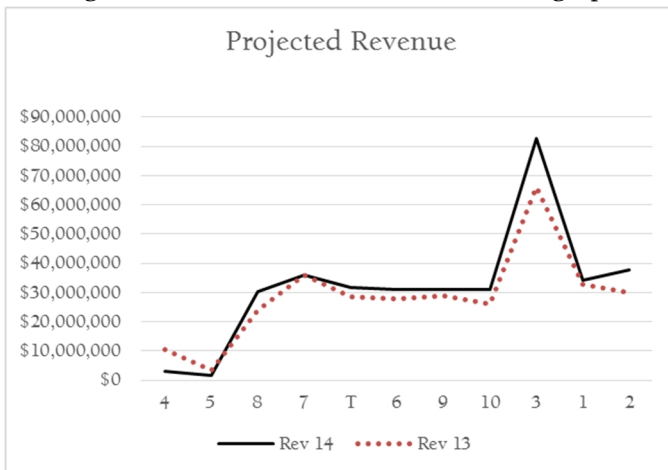


Figure 2. Estimated maximum revenue, 2014 and 2013

Looking at APC per article, we run into an anomaly: where the Shen/Björk estimate is \$178 for 2014, the calculated average for the full survey is considerably higher, \$262.66. The range of the ten samples is

from a low of \$18.42 to a high of \$513.08, but the five “good” samples range from \$226.95 to \$302.71, a reasonably narrow range.

Finally, consider the mean (average) number of articles per journal in 2014, in journals that had articles. The Shen/Björk figure is around 50; my survey yields 36.8. In fact, I find only 327 journals with at least 25 articles in the first half of 2014 (and only 267 with at least 50 articles in all of 2013).

The median is even lower—12 articles, or six in the first half—and that’s not surprising. The standard deviation in most years was at least twice the average: as usual, these journals are *very* heterogeneous. How heterogeneous? In the first half of 2014, three journals had more than 1,000 articles each (but fewer than 1,300); six more had at least 500 articles; 16 had 250 to 499 articles—but at the same time, only 819 of the total had at least 11 articles in the first half of 2014, and only 1,544 had at least five articles in those six months.

Conclusion

I could find no way to get from these samples to the Shen/Björk figures. Not even close. They show too many active journals by roughly a factor of two, too many articles by a factor of close to three, and too much revenue by a factor of two—and too many articles per journal as well.

Maybe a different set of samples on a different survey database would yield a difference, that is, would suggest sample aberration as a reason for the hugely different figures? It’s important to note that Shen/Björk did *not* use random samples: they used stratified samples. We may get to that later. Meanwhile, Read on...

Second Attempt: Untrimmed List

The first five samples in Part 1 showed that even a 20% sample *could* yield extreme results over a heterogeneous universe, especially if the randomization was less than ideal.

Given that the most obvious explanation for the data discrepancies is sampling, I thought it might be worth doing a second set of samples, this time each one being a considerably smaller portion of the universe. I decided to use the same sample size as in the Shen/Björk study, 613 journals—and this time the universe was the *full* figshare dataset [Crawford, Walt \(2015\): Open Access Journals 2014, Beall-list \(not in DOAJ\) subset, figshare](#). I assigned RAND() on each row, froze the results, then sorted by that column. Each sample was 613 journals; I took 11 samples (leaving 205 journals unsampled but included in the total figures). I adjusted the multipliers.

More than half of the rows in the full dataset have *no* articles (and no revenue). You could reasonably expect extremely varied results—e.g., it wouldn’t be improbable for a sample to consist entirely of no-article journals or of all journals with articles (thus yielding numbers more than twice as high as one might expect).

In this case, the results have a “dog that did not bark in the night” feel to them. Table 3 shows the 11 sample projections and the total article counts.

Sample	2014	2013	2012	2011
6	88,165	72,034	40,801	20,473
10	91,186	75,025	50,820	31,523
5	95,338	93,886	56,047	27,893
4	97,313	80,978	51,343	36,039
1	99,956	97,153	83,606	52,983
2	105,967	87,468	50,617	20,880
7	106,693	72,658	40,119	29,055
Total	121,311	99,994	64,325	34,543
9	127,747	100,653	73,326	32,075
3	140,292	122,128	77,958	36,634
8	154,754	114,360	79,323	35,632
11	160,591	143,312	91,011	53,579

Table 3. Article projections by year, 9% samples

Although these are much smaller samples (percentagewise) over a much more heterogeneous dataset, the range of results is, while wider than for samples 6-10 in the first attempt, not dramatically so. Figure 3 shows the same data in graphic form (using the same formatting as Figure 1 for easy comparison).

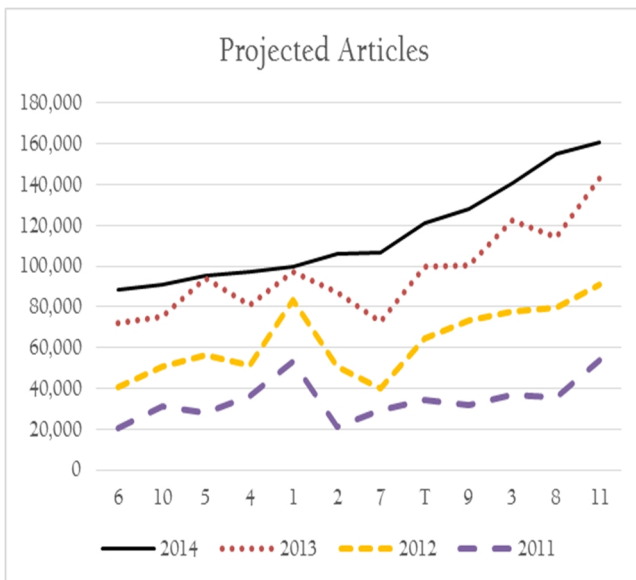


Figure 3. Estimated article counts by year, 9% sample

The maximum revenue samples show a slightly wider range than the article count projections: 2.01 to one, as compared to 1.82 to 1. That's still a fairly narrow range. Table 4 shows the figures, with samples in the same order as for article projections (Table 3).

Sample	2014	2013
6	\$27,904,972	\$24,277,062
10	\$32,666,922	\$27,451,802
5	\$19,479,393	\$20,980,689
4	\$24,975,329	\$25,507,720
1	\$30,434,762	\$30,221,463
2	\$30,793,406	\$25,461,851
7	\$30,725,482	\$21,497,760
Total	\$31,863,087	\$28,537,554
9	\$29,642,696	\$24,386,137
3	\$39,104,335	\$41,415,454
8	\$36,654,201	\$29,382,149
11	\$35,420,001	\$34,710,583

Table 4. Estimated Maximum Revenue, 9% samples

As with maximum revenue, so with cost per article: a broader range than for the last five samples (and total) in the first attempt, but a fairly narrow range, at 1.75 to 1, as shown in Table 5.

Sample	2014	2013
6	\$316.51	\$337.02
10	\$358.25	\$365.90
5	\$204.32	\$223.47
4	\$256.65	\$315.00
1	\$304.48	\$311.07
2	\$290.59	\$291.10
7	\$287.98	\$295.88
Total	\$262.66	\$285.39
9	\$232.04	\$242.28
3	\$278.73	\$339.12
8	\$236.85	\$256.93
11	\$220.56	\$242.20

Table 5. APC per article, 9% samples and total

Rather than providing redundant graphs, I'll provide one more table: the average (mean) articles per journal (ignoring empty journals), in Table 6.

Sample	2014	2013	2012	2011
6	27.85	20.59	20.66	16.79
10	29.35	20.75	22.73	23.10
1	30.06	25.54	38.13	38.41
5	30.26	27.63	27.18	20.88
4	31.46	22.86	23.42	29.90
2	33.94	24.79	25.08	15.14
7	34.66	20.68	20.17	22.48
Total	36.80	27.47	30.08	25.51
3	42.01	34.90	38.63	27.13
9	42.10	29.75	35.82	26.30
8	43.86	31.25	38.20	26.39
11	47.88	40.12	47.13	38.04

Table 6. Average articles per journal, 9% samples

Note that Table 6 is arranged from lowest average in 2014 to highest average; the rows are not (quite) in the same order as in Tables 3-5. The range here is 1.72 to 1, an even narrower range. On the other hand, sample 11 does show an average articles per journal figure that's not much below the Shen/Björk estimate.

One More Try

What would happen if I assigned a new random number (again using RAND()) in each row and reran the eleven samples?

The results do begin to suggest that the difference between my nearly-full survey and the Shen/Björk study could be due to sample variation. To wit, this time the article totals range from 64,933 to 169,739, a range of 2.61 to 1. The lowest figure is less than half the actual figure, so it's not entirely implausible that a sample could yield a number three times as high.

The total revenue range is also wider, from \$22.7 million to \$41.3 million, a range of 1.82 to 1. It's still a stretch to get to \$74 million, but not as *much* of a stretch. In this set of samples, the cost per article ranges from \$169.22 to \$402.89, a range of 2.38 to 1. At least one sample shows a mean articles-per-journal figure of 51.5, essentially identical to the Shen/Björk figure.

Conclusion

Sampling variation with 9% samples *could* yield numbers as far from the full-survey numbers as those in the Shen/Björk article, although for total article count it's still a pretty big stretch.

But that article was using closer to 5% samples—and they weren't actually random samples. Could that explain the differences?

Third Attempt: Replication?

What would happen if I replicated the sampling techniques actually used in the study (to the extent that I understand the article)?

I couldn't *precisely* replicate the sampling. My working dataset had already been stripped of several thousand "journals" and quite a few "publishers," and I took Beall's lists a few months before Shen/Björk did. (In the end, the number of journals and "journals" in their study was less than 20% larger than in my earlier analysis, although there's no way of knowing how many of those journals and "journals" actually published anything. In any case, if the Shen/Björk numbers had been 20% or 25% larger than mine, I would have said "sounds reasonable" and let it go at that.)

For each tier in the Shen/Björk article, I took two samples, both using random techniques, and for all but Tier 4, I used two projection techniques—one based on the number of active true gold OA journals in the tier, one based on *all* journals in the tier. In each tier, I used a sample size and technique that followed the description in the Shen/Björk article.

The results were interesting. Extreme differences between the lowest sample and the highest sample include 2014 article counts for Tier 2 (publishers with 10 to 99 journals), the largest group of journals and articles, where the high sample was 97,856 and the low—actually, in this case, the actual counted figure—was 46,770: that's a 2.09 to 1 range. There's also maximum revenue, where the high sample for Tier 2 was \$30,327,882 while the low sample (once again the counted figure) was \$9,574,648: a 3.17 to 1 range—in other words, a range wide enough to explain the difference between my figures and the Shen/Björk figures purely on the basis of sample deviation. (It could be worse: the 2013 projected revenue figures for Tier 2 range from a high of \$41,630,771 to a low of \$8,644,820, a range of 4.82 to 1!)

Once you add the tiers together, the extremes narrow somewhat. Table 7 shows the low, actual, and high total article projections, noting that the 2013, 2012, and 2011 low and high might *not* be the actual extremes (I took the lowest and highest 2014 figures for each tier, using the other figures from that sample.) It's still a broad range for each year, but not quite as broad. The actual numbers are higher than in earlier tables largely because journals in *DOAJ* had not been excluded at the time this dataset was captured.

	2014	2013	2012	2011
Low	134,980	130,931	92,020	45,605
Actual	135,294	115,698	85,601	54,545
High	208,325	172,371	136,256	84,282

Table 7. Article projections by year, stratified sample

The range for 2014 is 1.54 to 1: broad, but narrower than in the first two attempts. On the other hand, the range for maximum revenues is *larger* than in the first two attempts: 2.18 to 1 for 2014 and a very broad 2.46 to 1 for 2013, as in Table 8.

	2014	2013
Low	\$30,651,963	\$29,145,954
Actual	\$37,375,352	\$34,460,968
High	\$66,945,855	\$71,589,249

Table 8. Maximum revenue projections, stratified sample

The high figures here are pretty close to those offered by Shen/Björk, whereas the high mark for projected article count is still less than half that suggested by Shen/Björk. (Note also that in Table 7, the actual counts for 2013 and 2012 are actually *lower* than the lowest combined samples!)

For the graphically inclined, Figure 4 shows the low, actual and high projections for the third sample. This graph is *not* comparable to the earlier ones, since the horizontal axis is years rather than samples.

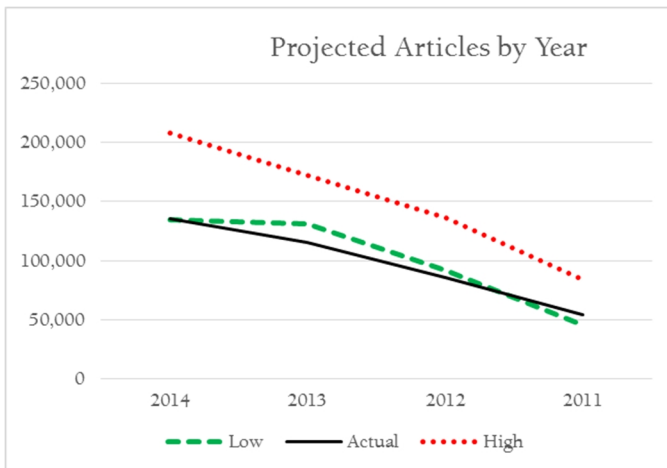


Figure 4. Estimated article counts by year, stratified

It's probably worth noting that, even after removing thousands of "journals" and quite a few publishers in earlier steps, it's still the case that only 57% of the apparent journals were actual, active gold OA journals—a percentage ranging from 55% for Tier 1 publishers to 61% for Tier 3.

Conclusion

It does appear that, for projected articles, the stratified sampling methodology used by Shen/Björk may work *better* than using a pure random sample across all journals—but for projected revenues, it's considerably worse.

This attempt could answer the revenue discrepancy, which in any case is a much smaller discrepancy (as noted, my average APC per article is considerably higher than Shen/Björk's)—but it doesn't fully explain the huge difference in article counts.

Overall Conclusions

I do not doubt that Shen/Björk followed sound statistical methodologies, which is quite different than agreeing that the Beall lists make a proper subject for study. The article didn't identify the number of worthless articles or the amount spent on them; it attempted to identify the number of articles published by publishers Beall disapproved of in late summer 2014, which is an entirely different matter.

That set aside, how did the Shen/Björk sampling and my nearly-complete survey wind up so far apart? I see four likely reasons:

- While Shen/Björk accounted for empty journals (but didn't encounter as many as I did), they did not control for journals that have articles but are not gold OA journals. That makes a significant difference.
- Sampling is not the same as counting, and the more heterogeneous the universe, the more that's true. That explains most of the differences, I believe (on the revenue side, it can explain *all* of them).
- The first two reasons, enhanced by two or three months' of additional listings, combined to yield a much higher estimate of active journals than my survey: more than twice as many.
- The second reason resulted in a much higher average number of articles per journal than in my survey (53 as compared to 36), which, combined with the doubled number of journals, neatly explains the huge difference in article counts.

The net result is that, while Shen/Björk carried out a plausible sampling project, the final numbers raise needless alarm about the extent of “bad” articles. Even if we accept that all articles in these projections are somehow defective, which I do not, the total of such articles in 2014 appears to be considerably less than one-third of the number of articles published in serious gold OA journals (that is, those in *DOAJ*)—not the “nearly as many” the study might lead one to assume.

I do *not* plan to do a followup survey of publishers and journals in the Beall lists. It's tempting in some ways, but it's not a good use of my time

(or anybody else's time, I believe). A much better investigation of the lists would focus on three more fundamental issues:

- Is each publisher on the primary list so fundamentally flawed that every journal in its list should be regarded as ppppredatory?
- Is each journal on the standalone-journal list actually ppppredatory?
- In both cases, has Beall made a clear and cogent case for such labeling?

The first two issues are far beyond my ken; as to the first, there's a huge difference between a publisher having some bad journals and it making sense to dismiss all of that publisher's journals. (See my longer PPPPredatory piece for a discussion of that.)

Then there's that final bullet...

Lagniappe: The Rationales, Once Over Easy

Yes, I know, it's hard to call it lagniappe when it's free. In any case, I did spend some time doing a first-cut version of the third bullet just above: That is, did I find clear, cogent, convincing explanations as to why publishers were questionable?

I looked at 223 multijournal publishers responsible for 6,429 journals and "journals" (3,529 of them actual gold OA journals actually publishing articles at some point 2011-2014) from my trimmed dataset (excluding DOAJ journals and some others). I did *not* look at the singleton journals; that would have more than doubled the time spent on this.

Basically, I searched *Scholarly Open Access* for each publisher's name and read the commentary carefully—if *there was a commentary*. If there was one, I gauged whether it constituted a reasonable case for considering all of that publisher's journals questionable *at the time the commentary was written*, or if it fell short of being conclusive but made a semi-plausible case. (Note the second italicized clause above: journals and publishers *do* change, but they're only removed from the list after a mysterious appeals process.)

I also looked at my own annotations for publishers—did I flag them as definitely sketchy or somewhat questionable, independently of Beall's comments? I'm fairly tough: if a publisher doesn't state its APCs or its policy or makes clearly-false statements or promises absurdly short peer review turnaround, those are all red flags.

Beall Results

For an astonishing 65% of the publishers checked *there was no commentary*. The only occurrences of the publishers' names were in the lists themselves.

The reason for this seems fairly clear. Beall's blog changed platforms in January 2012, and Beall did not choose to migrate earlier posts. These

publishers—which account for 41% of the journals and “journals” in my analysis and 38% of the active Gold OA journals—were presumably earlier additions to the list.

This puts the lie to the claims of some Beall fans that he clearly explains why each publisher or journal is on the list, including comments from those who might disagree. That claim is *simply not true* for *most* of the publishers I looked at, representing 38% of the active journals, 23% of the 2014 articles, and 20% of the projected 2014 revenues.

My guess is that it’s worse than this. I didn’t attempt to find individual journals, but although those journals only represent 5% of the active journals I studied, they’re prolific journals, accounting for 38% of 2014 articles (and 13% of 2014 potential revenue).

If Beall was serious about his list being a legitimate tool rather than a personal hobbyhorse, there would be two ongoing lists (one for publishers, one for authors) rather than an annual compilation—and each entry would have two portions: the publisher or journal name (with hyperlink), and a “Rationale” tab linking to Beall’s explanation of why the publisher or journal is there. (Those lists should be pages on the blog, not posts, and I think the latest ones are.) Adding such links to posts would be relatively trivial compared to the overall effort of evaluating publishers, and it would add considerable accountability.

In another 7% of cases, I couldn’t locate the rationale but can’t be sure there isn’t one: some publishers have names composed of such generic words that I could never be quite sure whether I’d missed a post. (The search box doesn’t appear to support phrase searches.) That 7% represents 4% of active journals in the Beall survey, 4% of 2014 articles, but only 1.7% of potential 2014 revenue.

Then there are the others: cases where Beall’s rationale is available. As I read the rationales, I conclude that Beall made a sufficiently strong case for 9% of the publishers, a questionable but plausible case for 11%—and, in my opinion, no real case for 9% of the publishers.

Those figures break out to active journals, articles and revenues as follows:

- **Case made—definitely questionable publishers:** 22% of active journals, 11% of 2014 articles, 41% of 2014 potential revenues. (That final figure is particularly interesting.)
- **Questionable—possibly questionable publishers:** 16% of active journals, 16% of 2014 articles, 18% of 2014 potential revenues.
- **No case:** 14% of active journals, 7% of 2014 articles, 6% of 2014 potential revenues.

If I wanted to suggest an extreme version, I could say that I was able to establish a strong case for definitely questionable publishing for fewer than 12,000 published articles in 2014—in other words, less than 3% of the activity in DOAJ-listed journals.

But that's an extreme version and, in my opinion, dead wrong, even without noting that it doesn't allow for any of the independent journals (which accounted for nearly 40,000 articles in 2014) being demonstrably questionable.

Combined Results

Here's what I find when I combine Beall's rationales with my own findings when looking at publishers, ignoring independent journals:

- **Definitely questionable publishers:** Roughly 19% of 2014 articles, or about 19,000 within the subset studied, and 44% of potential 2014 revenue, or about \$11.4 million. Note that the article count is still only about 4% of serious OA activity—but if you add in all independent journals, that could go as high as 59,000, or 12%. Putting it another way, about 31% of articles from multijournal publishers in Beall's list were in questionable journals.
- **Possibly questionable publishers:** Roughly 21% of 2014 articles (34% excluding independent journals) and 21% of 2014 potential revenues.
- **Case not made:** Roughly 22% of 2014 articles (36% excluding independent journals) and 22% of 2014 potential revenues.

It's possible that some portion of that 22% is sketchy but in ways that I didn't catch—but note that the combined score is the *worst* of Beall's rationale or my independent observations.

So What?

I've said before that the worst thing about the Shen/Björk study is that it's based on a fatally flawed foundation, a junk list of one man's opinions—a man who, it's increasingly clear, dislikes all open access.

My attempts to determine Beall's cases confirmed that opinion. In far too many cases, the only available case is “trust me: I'm Jeffrey Beall and I say this is ppppredatory.” Now, of course, I've agreed that every journal is ppppredatory, so it's hard to argue with that—but easy to argue with his advice to avoid all such journals, except as a call to abandon journal publishing entirely.

Which, if you look at it that way, makes Jeffrey Bell a compatriot to Björn Brems. Well, why not? In his opposition to all Gold OA, he's already a compatriot to Stevan Harnad: the politics of access makes strange alliances.

Otherwise, I conclude that perhaps a quarter of articles in non-DOAJ journals are from publishers that are simply not in DOAJ. The journals may be serious OA, but the publishers haven't taken the necessary steps to validate that seriousness. They're in a gray area.

Monitoring the Field

Maybe this also says something about the desirability of ongoing independent monitoring of the state of gold OA publishing. When it comes to *DOAJ*-listed journals, my approach has been “trust but verify”: I checked to make sure the journals actually *did* make APC policies and levels clear, for example, and that they really were gold OA journals. When it comes to Beall’s lists, my approach was “doubt but verify”: I didn’t automatically assume the worst, but I’ll admit that I started out with a somewhat jaundiced eye when looking at these publishers and journals.

I also think this exercise says something about the need for full monitoring, rather than sampling. The differences between even well-done sampling (I believe Shen/Björk did a proper job) and full monitoring, in a field so wildly heterogeneous as scholarly journals, is just too large: about three to one.

As I’ve made clear, I’d be delighted to continue such monitoring of *serious* gold OA (as represented by *DOAJ*), but only if there’s at least a modest level of fiscal support. The door’s still open, either for hired consultation, part-time employment, direct grants or indirect support through buying my books or contributing to *Cites & Insights*. But I won’t begin another cycle on spec: so far, given roughly a dozen sales in nearly three months, it would be foolhardy to do so: maybe there’s just no broad, serious interest.

As for the rest of gold OA, the gray area and the questionable publishers, this might be worth monitoring, but I’ve said above that I’m not willing to sign up for another round based on Beall’s lists, and I don’t know of any other good way to do this.

I do know that gold OA journals and publishers who are serious about their work *should* be in *DOAJ*. Period. I also suspect that many questionable journals (that actually publish articles) aren’t so much ripping off authors as they are performing services made necessary thanks to misguided policies for degree granting and other things. There should never be a reason why an author feels the need to publish in a truly questionable journal, if what the author’s doing is actual scholarship. But that’s another set of discussions, isn’t it?

Media

50 Movie Gunslinger Classics, Part 2

Disc 7

Showdown at Williams Creek, 1991, color. Allan Kroeker (dir.), Tom Burlinson, Stephen E. Miller, Michelle Thrush, Raymond Burr, Donnelly Rhodes. 1:37.

This is a flashback film—except for the first few and last few minutes, it’s almost all flashbacks, as a man on trial for murder reluctantly tells his life story. The man, John “Kootenai” Brown (Tom Burlinson), was a British soldier from Ireland who emigrated to British Columbia in 1865, with a friend, to seek his fortune in the gold fields of Williams Creek. After various problems, he went—with a Scot who always seemed a bit less than trustworthy—to the Northern Territories, also for gold, and wound up first being shot with an arrow, then living with a group of Metis, a tribe of half-French/half-Native Americans, where he finds love and a family. Eventually, he winds up shooting the Scot, just as the Scot has robbed him of a season’s worth of wolf hides. (Kootenai Brown is his Metis name, where Kootenai means “the one who comes from the west,” since he’d traveled from BC eastward.)

That’s an absurd oversimplification of the plot, based on a true story. Raymond Burr gets star billing on the disc sleeve (but not in the movie), but he’s a secondary character, the imperious and racist judge at the trial.

It’s a leisurely film in some ways, and I found that it worked reasonably well. Filmed in Canada (a Canadian Film Board production, which may explain a 1991 movie being in the public domain?). Good scenery. The print’s reasonably good. All in all, while it’s not a great film, I thought it was worth \$1.50.

Four Rode Out, 1970 (or 1968 or 1971), color. John Peyser (dir.), Pernell Roberts, Sue Lyon, Julian Mateos, Leslie Nielsen. 1:39 [1:35]

This Western is decidedly leisurely. A Mexican bank robber, after stopping by to visit his American girlfriend [Sue Lyon] (who then gets called a whore by her father, after which the father shoots himself), heads out...and a marshall (Pernell Roberts) on his last case is sent out to bring him back. The marshall encounters a self-identified Pinkerton man (Leslie Nielsen) also out to bring back—or claim the reward for—the bandit.

All three wind up riding out together (or, rather, the girl follows the other two), much to the marshall’s dismay. They ride and ride and ride. They find the bandit’s dead horse and...well, the second half of the film (or

more than half) involves the badly-wounded bandit, his assertion that the Pinkerton man is actually the other bank robber and the one who shot a guard, and the attempt to get everybody back to town (walking through the desert with frequent red-sun shots) before they die of heat and thirst. It is, as I say, leisurely...but made significantly better by Janis Ian, who provides the music (mostly twelve-string guitar, some singing) and begins the movie as a visible singer.

Great cast (Nielsen as a wholly untrustworthy shoot-first-and-ask-questions-later sneering type is wholly believable), good music, good scenery. Some censorship (oddly—a few words, and, apparently, two or three minutes of partial nudity). An unsatisfactory plot and ending, to my taste. Very leisurely, to the point where I double-timed through the last 40 minutes or so and *still* found it leisurely. Another one where its public domain status seems odd. A Spanish production. On balance, maybe \$1.25.

They Call Me Trinity (or *My Name is Trinity*, orig. *Lo chiamavano Trinità...*), 1970, color. Enzo Barboni (as E.B. Clucher) (dir. & writer), Terence Hill, Bud Spencer, Steffen Zacharias, Dan Sturkey, Gisela Hahn, Farley Granger, Remo Capitani. 1:46 [1:50]

Both spaghetti western and takeoff on spaghetti westerns, this one's delightful—more comedy than anything else. It's also much more character-driven than violence-driven, and while there are a few typically ungory shootings, the biggest scenes are fights with the guns put away, including a *long* scene near the end (maybe 8 minutes).

The plot? This guy (Trinity) comes—well, not exactly *riding* into a waystation, more asleep on a sled of sorts being hauled by his horse. He's so dirty that when he hits the street dust flies up in the air. He's also the fastest gun anywhere. We get to the point where he comes into town and finds that his crooked brother is acting as sheriff (his brother's as fast as he is, but is also a mountain of a man who beats men down with one blow). The brother's escaped from prison and is waiting for his gang to catch up so they can stage more robberies. In the meantime, the town's troubled by The Major who, with his gang, wants to run a bunch of Mormon settlers and their cattle out of the valley so The Major's horses can have it.

It ends up...well, it ends up as it started, with Trinity asleep while his horse is dragging him along. In between, it's great fun. Possibly best dialogue: After the two brothers (respectively the Right Hand of the Devil and the Left Hand of the Devil) have beaten up seven of The Major's men after they insulted their mother, Trinity says "I'm sorry, but I couldn't let them call Ma an old... [I'm *guessing* whore in the original]." His brother: "But it's true." Trinity: "Yeah, but she ain't that old."

It's panned-and-scanned full-screen from a very wide-screen original, but it's done well. The print's decent, and I give this one a full \$2.00.

The Gun and the Pulpit, 1974, color, TV movie, Daniel Petrie (dir.), Marjoe Gortner, Slim Pickens, Pamela Sue Martin, Estelle Parsons, Jeff Corey, David Huddleston. 1:14.

I reviewed this one in the March 2006 *Cites & Insights* as part of the 50-Movie All Stars Collection, and while I didn't rewatch it this time around, it got one of the best reviews in that set: A full \$2.00.

Disc 8

Kid Vengeance (aka *Vengeance* or *Vendetta* or *Take Another Hard Ride*), 1977, color. Joseph Manduke (dir.), Lee Van Cleef, Jim Brown, Leif Garrett. Glynnis O'Connor, John Marley.

This flick mixes two plots I'm familiar with from other Westerns: One in which a kid, somehow not killed when outlaws kill his parents, grows up to take vengeance on them—and another in which a man, with evidence that outlaws have killed his wife and compatriots, manages to kill the outlaws off one by one using a range of techniques. But this isn't *quite* either of those, partly because the kid (in this case, Leif Garrett) doesn't grow up: he starts taking out the killers shortly after he becomes aware that they've raped and killed his mother, killed his father and kidnapped his sister. (Oddly enough, that last part was accidental...)

But there's more! A black miner (Brown), after having an assayer confirm that he's got good-quality gold ore, encounters a quartet of idiots/thieves, bests them (one dies, shot by another one), rides out of town and sets up another plot, as well as some comedy relief in what's otherwise a fairly gritty picture. This time, Lee Van Cleef is full-on villain, the head of an outlaw band and the rapist in question.

No point going through more of the plot. Once you grant that a kid who has to be starving can sneak up on sleeping experienced bandits, stand there for a while, stuff a scorpion into one of their shoes, and walk away...well, sure, it all works. Garrett is very good, Brown's fine, Van Cleef is Van Cleef. An Israeli production. I guess it's worth \$1.25.

Rage at Dawn, 1955, color. Timm Whelan (dir.), Randolph Scott, Forrest Tucker, Mala Powers, J. Carrol Naish, Edgar Buchanan, Denver Pyle. 1:27 [1:25]

This one's unusual in that it's a full-length, color, mid-'50s Western, and a fairly traditional Western at that. It's the story of the Reno Brothers, a group of brothers who rob banks (with a couple of colleagues) and have a bad tendency to shoot anybody who causes trouble. They own the local officials (three of whom share in the proceeds) so their Indiana county is a refuge. They live in their sister's house (she hates the robbing but can't

turn them out) and have an honest brother who's a farmer. With one possible exception, they're not the brightest bunch; in some ways it's amazing that they aren't all already dead.

The Peterson Detective Agency brings in a tall, handsome undercover agent (Scott), who stages a train robbery to show the Renos that he's hotter stuff than they are (they never tried train robbery), and eventually gets them involved in a train robbery as a way to get them arrested. Or killed (it certainly gets some others killed!). Meanwhile, he's taken a liking to the sister, and it's clearly mutual.

Strong cast. It's OK—although I found the last few minutes a little tough to swallow (but won't pass on the situation). Not great, not bad: \$1.50.

Billy the Kid Returns, 1938, b&w. Joseph Kane (dir.), Roy Rogers, Smiley Burnette, Lynne Roberts/Mary Hart, Morgan Wallace, Fred Kohler, Wade Boteler. 0:53.

I find that it makes sense to review and rate films in some sort of context; the context for the one-hour "oaters" is different than that for full-length features, and the context for singing cowboys is different still. And of the latter, Roy Rogers stands out for his voice, his looks—and the fun he seems to bring to every role, where he's pretty much always playing a character named Roy Rogers.

That said, to buy into this movie you have to believe that Billy the Kid was a dead ringer for Roy Rogers—and that Billy the Kid, while admittedly a cold-blooded killer, was a hero to homesteaders, as he was the only one defending them from the cattlemen who wanted to prevent any farming. Roy Rogers first plays Billy the Kid, hero, thief and killer...up to and including the night where Pat Garrett shoots him dead. Then Roy Rogers rides onto the scene (Lincoln County, New Mexico—about all this flick has in common with Billy the Kid's actual life), having left Texas after he lost his deputy sheriff's job because he was too young (or something like that), and finds himself dealing with a band of outlaws who are stealing horses and burning down a farmhouse. The outlaws are, of course, part of the cattlemen's group and in cahoots with the businessman who has a monopoly on trade in the town.

That's just the start of a movie that moves right along...and mostly involves Roy Rogers impersonating Billy the Kid first in an attempt to help the homesteaders, then in an attempt to bring the cattlemen's gang to justice by tricking them into committing a *Federal* crime, so they won't just be set free by their peers. Oh, and Pat Garrett's continuing suspicion that Roy Rogers is no better than Billy the Kid...

A lot of fun, a lot of music (I figure there's about an hour's TV episode worth of actual plot here: the other 11-12 minutes is singing), Smiley Burnette with his special "froggy" vocals. Roy gets the girl (Roy *always*

gets the girl). What can I say? It's what a singing cowboy movie should be, and probably no less plausible than most. \$1.25.

Curse of Demon Mountain (orig. *The Shadow of Chikara*), 1977, color. Earl E. Smith (dir., also producer, writer), Joe Don Baker, Sondra Locke, Ted Neeley, Joy N. Houck Jr., Slim Pickens. 1:54 [1:32]

First we get some Civil War sequences (it's clear the filmmaker is a Grey at heart even before they use "The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down" in the soundtrack, the only song in the movie). Then one Confederate officer (Joe Don Baker), his half-Irish/half-Cherokee sidekick and scout (Houck) and a dying older soldier (named "Virgil Cane," to be sure, and played by Slim Pickens who only has a few minutes to masticate some scenery) are off on their way—and as he's dying, Virgil tells the officer about the treasure he's hidden in a cave in a mountain—some "transparent stones" he got out of Arkansas rivers.

After the former officer finds out that his house has been taken over as a Federal office and that his wife—who had been told he was dead a year before, but never mind that—has taken up with a Federal officer. Following a big fight scene, the officer, his sidekick and a geologist they pick up from a local university are off to find the stones and see what they are.

After that, it's lots of trouble—a dead group of settlers shot with odd black arrows, a black arrow arriving out of nowhere, a woman (Locke), apparently raped, who they take with them, the scout concluding that those shooting the arrows must be demons, since they leave no tracks, a trio of bushwhackers (who the four adventurers happily kill by setting off a landslide) and, eventually, the mountain. Which the scout says he's heard about, the Mountain of Demons.

Don't expect happy endings. I figured out the twist about ten minutes before it was revealed. It's not a bad twist. Unfortunately, it's also not a very good movie—sloppily filmed, poorly played, just not really very good. Maybe the missing 22 minutes (apparently including a bar sequence, since a bartender and barmaid are both in the credits but there's no bar that I can remember in the movie) would have helped. Maybe not. Generously, \$0.75.

Disc 9

Law Men, 1944, b&w. Lambert Hillyer (dir.), Johnny Mack Brown, Raymond Hatton, Jan Wiley, Kirby Grant, Robert Frazer. 0:58 [0:54]

If this movie was about 15 years older, I might excuse the awful quality of the print (missing frames, generally dark, some cases where it sure looks as though they're swapping in old stock footage when they change views) on the grounds of early movie history. But this one's from 1944, making it fairly late in the game for the "B" westerns.

The plot: two U.S. marshals are sent to a town that's been having a lot of robberies, working undercover. One rides into town, sees one such robbery with four bad guys riding away and shooting things up, shoots the fourth—and becomes an instant hero. (There's no sheriff in town.) He claims to be a cobbler (because that's the first business he sees), and suddenly—turns out the cobbler was shot some months back—he's in business as a cobbler, much to the eventual woe of anybody who needs boots repaired. The other marshal trails the bandits to their lair and works his way into the gang.

Doesn't take long for us to find out that the reason *every* gold shipment from the bank (robbed three times this year itself) gets robbed is that the banker's running the banditry. Of course, nobody *ever* suspects a banker. Meanwhile, the banker and gang conspire to set up his honest assistant and almost manage to do so. Naturally, it all turns out OK after some fancy draws and shooting and a few deaths here and there.

It's just...not very good. Not even by the relaxed standard of these sub-hour programmers. Maybe \$0.75.

West of the Divide, 1934, b&w. Robert N. Bradbury (dir & screenplay), John Wayne, Virginia Brown Faire, George 'Gabby' Hayes, Loyd Whitlock, Yakima Canutt. 0:54.

I like this for possibly the wrong reasons: there's an innocence and sweetness about it, or maybe that's mostly low budget. Set in the 20th century Old West (most folks ride horses but the town doctor drives a car), it features John Wayne as an orphan—with his sidekick (Hayes in a very early role; Canutt is a henchman in this flick and the stunt double for some remarkable stunts) who rescued him when his father was shot and the killers believed they'd shot him too. (OK, I've only seen *that* plot basis a dozen other times.) Oh, and just as Roy Rogers is the spittin' image of Jesse James, Wayne is the spittin' image of a killer who stumbles onto him and his sidekick, dies from the poisoned waterhole he drank at, and has in his pocket an introductory letter to a local rancher (Whitlock, an almost Snidelyesque villain)...and the Wanted poster showing he's a killer. So, since they want to know more about this rancher anyway...

The rancher's trying to buy another ranch, whose owner—with the best water around (*never* heard that one before!)—doesn't want to sell. That's OK: the bad guy first arranges to steal the money the beautiful daughter takes to the bank (and fails, but his henchmen wing the poor girl, against his direct orders—and Wayne and friend manage to get the money deposited), then to rustle all the rest of the good guy's cattle while killing off the good rancher (a killing left to Wayne).

More plot, lots of horse-riding (and one good runaway-team sequence), some really *crappy* henchmen (who, among other things, accidentally

gun down their boss), culminating in happiness all around and, *of course*, Wayne marrying the daughter. (One example—repeated twice—of what I assume was *really* low budget work: As the cattle are being herded out of the compound, in one of those midnights where you can see everything clearly, I would swear I could cattle turning after leaving the compound on a course to re-enter the compound at the back so that 20 or 30 cattle can look like hundreds.) The sweetness, in addition to all the charming plot duplications, is partly that this is the young babyface Wayne, partly that the Big Fistfights (with acrobatics included) are remarkably hamhanded examples of “I’ll hit somewhere five inches to the left of your face, in midair, then you’ll do the same to me, then...”. By the way, if you’re an IMDB review reader, this is *not* a print with the new and deproved score; it has very little incidental music. Great cinema? No, but I’ll give it \$1.00.

In Old Santa Fe, 1934, b&w. David Howard (dir.), Ken Maynard, Tarzan (horse), Evalyn Knapp, H. B. Warner, Kenneth Thomson, George ‘Gabby’ Hayes, Gene Autry. 1:04.

A tale of the New West—fast cars, phones and electric lights are standard, the cowboys riding in are mostly going to a dude ranch for an annual race, the horse-and-carriage is carrying dude ranch guests. Except that the ranch owner also uses the horses-and-carriage to deliver \$20,000 of gold (he owns a nearby mine) to the bank—with a driver and no guards.

Anyway...Kentucky (Ken Maynard) and his crotchety old sidekick (Hayes, who else?—and in fine fettle) are riding in, he’s singing a really pretty bad song, the ranch owner’s beautiful daughter drives by too fast and winds up ramming a tree, and meanwhile two city slickers come by in the carriage—contemplating plans to mess with the rancher. Oh, and the bad guy in charge also wants the girl.

Lots of plot. Attempted blackmail based on the rancher having changed his name after fleeing parole on phony charges—but charges, as it turns out, that he’d long since been cleared of. The crusty sidekick betting Kentucky’s horse and all their money against one of the crooks—as they make sure he doesn’t win, both by loosening his saddle (which doesn’t help) and stringing up a wire along the course on the assumption he’ll be in the lead (which does). Of course the good guys win in the end, after various plot turns. (The sleeve plot description is pretty much wrong.)

The real oddity here: The movie’s title credits feature Gene Autry first, all by himself, before introducing the cast with Ken Maynard and the rest. But as far as I can tell, Autry only appears as a singer doing one song—along with Smiley “Froggy” Burnette in an uncredited role. (Apparently, it was the first picture for both of them.) The picture’s title? That’s Autry’s song. To be honest, I didn’t find Maynard all that appealing as a singer, a cowboy or the hot male lead—but the film’s reasonably

good for its genre: good horse-riding, reasonably clever plot and all. I'll give it \$1.00.

Days of Jesse James, 1939, b&w. Joseph Kane (dir.), Roy Rogers, Gabby Hayes, Don 'Red' Barry, Pauline Moore, Harry Woods, Arthur Loft, Wade Boteler. 1:03 [0:53]

This one—another B programmer with *the* singing cowboy—surprised me. I was expecting a variant on the “Roy Rogers looks *exactly* like Jesse James” theme used in one other picture, but didn't get it. This time around, nobody knows what James looks like. except for the granddaughter of Gabby Whitaker (Hayes), who in this case is returning to Missouri with \$40,000+ after 16 years of placer gold mining in California. (The James gang holds up the train they're on; a brief scuffle with their dog results in James' kerchief-as-mask being pulled down briefly; James chooses not to take the \$40,000 in Gabby's valise.)

Once they reach town, the granddaughter convinces Gabby to deposit the money in the local bank (the banker was also on the stage). The banker can't resist that amount of money, so stages his own holdup, pretending to be the James gang. The Banker's Association wants Roy Rogers (peace officer) to help track James; the railroaders have their own person, who mostly wants to get the \$50,000 reward for James before anybody else does.

Lots more plot, and Rogers (his character name is *of course* Roy Rogers, and of course there's a song) and Gabby wind up pretending to be outlaws or, rather, ex-cons with no jobs, in order to get in with James' gang. One interesting plot twist has the banker fleeing town on the train...and Rogers and Gabby, pretending to be the James gang, robbing the train specifically to get back the bank-robbery loot, which they then return to the depositors as the sheriff watches.

Not bad. Seems to be missing a few minutes. As is frequently the case, Jesse James comes off as more Robin Hood than robber and far too honorable to shoot a man in the back. I'll give it \$1.00.

Disc 10

The Lawless Frontier, 1934, b&w. Robert N. Bradbury (dir. & story), John Wayne, Sheila Terry, Jack Rockwell, George “Gabby” Hayes, Yakima Canutt, Earl Dwire. 0:59 [0:49]

The sleeve makes more of this plot than I think it deserves—but maybe that's the missing ten minutes (out of an original 59 minutes!). What I got from the plot was horse riding, more horse riding, an occasional shot being fired, an idiot sheriff, even more horse riding, Gabby Hayes who apparently can't be killed with a knife in his back and bullet upside the head, more horse riding, a sheriff stupid enough to think that cuffing the outside of huge cowboy boots to a bed is somehow going to keep an

outlaw trapped? *really?*, even more horse riding, and of course the woman in the cast winds up married to John Wayne, who's the new and less stupid sheriff.

Even Yakima Canutt's stunt riding's not that great. Mostly for John Wayne completists. Charitably, \$0.50.

Rim of the Canyon, 1949, b&w. John English (dir.), Gene Autry, Champion, Nan Leslie, Thurston Hall, Clem Bevans, Walter Sande, Alan Hale Jr. 1:10

This is more like it—even if there isn't much real gunslinging (a fair amount of shooting, basically none of it precision or stunting). It's a real movie with an actual plot, and long enough that it could be considered a feature rather than a programmer. Gene Autry—and this one's late enough that it's "A Gene Autry Production"—may not be the #1 singing cowboy and wonder-horse, but he's a strong #2. And, of course, the character he almost always plays is named Gene Autry of the Flying A Ranch, with his horse Champion.

The plot (yes, there is a plot): three prisoners have escaped, notably including one who staged a holdup netting \$30,000 in silver (a lot of money at the time) and was caught and put away by Autry's father, the sheriff at the time. The escapee wants revenge, but also wants his \$30,000, and the other two escapees are there to help out. Autry just wants to win a stagecoach race as part of the town's annual festivities (if he wins, a local hot number will go to the dance to follow), but a competitor has removed one wheel's nut, so he crashes; the competitor laughs at his request to take him back into town—and he limps (he twisted his ankle) two miles to a ghost town, formerly owned by the miner whose \$30,000 was stolen. There, he meets up with the local teacher (female and a whole lot more interesting than the town floozie) who goes out there every couple of weeks and swears she's heard the miner speak to her.

Meanwhile, the thugs have lost one horse and decided to steal Champion as a replacement—forcing him into a nasty-looking metal bit that he really, truly does not like.

That's just the beginning. In the end, all is well (but no phony "and the hero marries the girl" ending), and along the way, it's a solid picture. As usual, The Hero prefers fistfights to actual gunplay—and it's Champion who deals the fatal blow to the chief villain. Along the way, we get to see Gene as his dad in a flashback. Only two songs, which is OK. Even though it's 1:10, I'll rate it as a B flick—which means \$1 in this case.

Man from Music Mountain, 1938, b&w. Joe Kane (dir.), Gene Autry, Smiley Burnette, Carol Hughes, Sally Payne, Ivan Miller, Ed Cassidy. 1:00 [sleeve; 0:58 IMDB, 0.53 actual on the disc]

Perhaps a more typical Autry flick, with his cowhands all singers and his sidekick Smiley “Froggy” Burnette. Lots of songs, an interesting instrumental number with some surprising instruments, a couple of Burnette-written comedy songs—and enough plot to keep it moving. It’s an odd one, though: it starts with con men buying up an old ghost town and abandoned gold mine and selling lots (and shares) on the basis that the recent opening of Boulder Dam means electricity and water coming soon, and with hydraulic mining they can work the mine. It’s a con—Autry, on his way back from a cattle run, spots it—but it takes in lots of people, including Froggy.

Where things get strange is that, between Autry’s counter-con (he salts the mine to con the con men into buying back the mining shares) and shootouts...well, he winds up making the con men’s case: The town winds up with electricity and a worthwhile mine. If he’d been in cahoots with the con men, he could scarcely have done a better job (but they probably wouldn’t have wound up arrested for killing one of his hands). It’s missing five minutes and possibly some plot development.

Do note that this is the 1938 Gene Autry flick, not the 1943 Roy Rogers flick with the same title prefaced with “The.” The sleeve description of the plot is just plain wrong—and the sleeve has the “The” from the 1943 flick. Anyway, it’s OK but nothing special. I’ll give it \$0.75.

Public Cowboy #1, 1937, b&w. Joe Kane (dir.), Gene Autry, Smiley “Froggy” Burnette, Ann Rutherford, William Farnum, Arthur Loft. 1:01 [0:53]

Another Gene Autry one-hour B-movie songfest with seven minutes missing—but this time, instead of being Gene Autry of the Flying “A” Ranch in some unstated location, he’s Gene Autry, a deputy sheriff in Grand Junction, Wyoming (ol’ Froggy’s the other deputy). The aging sheriff and deputies have a real problem: a band of rustlers using airplanes and shortwave radio is ruining the local cattlemen. The rustlers have an interesting MO: the plane spots a herd on the move with relatively few cowboys; they radio the main group telling them where to go; the main group—a truck full of horses, a couple of cars full of bad guys and a couple of big refrigerated trucks—kill off the cowboys, round up the herd into a makeshift corral, slaughter and skin them on the spot and load the carcasses into the trucks—adding the butcher’s signs later on.

There’s not much three guys with horses can do against this big high-tech gang, even if one of the horses is Champion. The townsfolk demand that the sheriff resign (egged on by the new editor of the local paper, that editor being—of course—young and pretty, since this is a singing cowboy movie). They bring in a hotshot detective agency to replace the sheriff and his deputies. There’s some entertainment (I find that I really don’t care for most of Autry’s written-for-the-movies songs,

at least at this early stage, and the Burnette number is flat-out racist), and the deputies manage to spring a trap, showing up the modern detectives. It's all a lot implausible, but not bad as B-movie entertainment. I'll give it \$0.75.

Disc 11

The Man from Utah, 1934, b&w. Robert Bradbury (dir.), John Wayne, Polly Ann Young, George Hayes, Yakima Canutt, George Cleveland. 0:52.

This flick—which embeds maybe 15 minutes of plot into a 51-minute movie largely through lots of rodeo “action” and really embarrassing “Indians from thousands of reservations in full regalia” stuff—begins by giving us young John Wayne as a singing cowboy. That's truly odd: it sounds like somebody else strumming a ukulele and singing, after which Wayne is holding a guitar up in one hand as if to say “what the heck am I doing holding a guitar while I'm riding?”

That's it for the singing cowboy, and probably a good thing. Otherwise, Wayne's a broke drifter who, in short order, prevents a bank robbery in the town he's just ridden into (where a pre-“Gabby” George Hayes is a U.S. Marshal looking out for a rodeo gang), rows a boat to get to the rodeo, gets involved with the gang, double-crosses them, figures out their methods, wins the rodeo, prevents *another* bank holdup...and, of course, gets the girl. (One IMDB review says there's no gunplay. The reviewer must have seen a different picture.)

As B programmers go, this is pretty mediocre. If you love rodeo action and some trick riding (thanks to Yakima Canutt, I imagine), you might find it OK. And for that, I'll give it, charitably, \$0.50.

Utah, 1945, b&w. John English (dir.), Roy Rogers, Trigger, Gabby Hayes, Dale Evans, Peggy Stewart. 1:17 [0:53]

I'm a sucker for Roy Rogers movies—I think he's the best singer and actor of the singing cowboys, and Trigger is, well, Trigger. Dale Evans doesn't hurt, either. But I was less enchanted by this flick than I expected to be, maybe because it's either too clever for its own good or too dumb.

The basic plot: Dale Evans is a lead showgirl in Chicago and, along with her friends, trying to deal with a promising new musical that's run out of funds—so she decides to go to Utah to sell the ranch her grandfather willed to her, which she's never seen. She wires ahead to Roy Rogers, foreman at the Bar X, who conspires with Gabby (who owns a wretched farm next to the fine Bar X) to figure out how to keep her from selling, which would presumably result in sheep taking over the cattle range. His method (after some byplay involving an attempt to shoot Rogers and some trick riding) is to pretend that Gabby's ranch is really the Bar X, so she'll figure it's not *worth* selling...but it backfires, because the crooks who wanted to pay her

\$20-\$25,000 so they can sell the Bar X for \$100,000, convince her to sell what she believes to be the Bar X for \$5,000 (with a worthless \$1,000 check as down payment).

There's more, and it all ends well, with the musical now called *Utah!* and starring...well, you can guess. Except that, along the way, Rogers' attempt to be clever set up a situation where everybody was worse off, and he does a jailbreak as part of his attempt to sour the deal. One IMDB review says Rogers acted like "a bit of a jerk" in this flick, and that's about right: the plot's mostly about his trying to undo the harm he caused in the first place. George 'Gabby' Hayes is considerably more misogynistic than usual, and it gets a little wearing. As usual, Rogers uses fists rather than guns, always looks great, and sings up a storm—but it was more than a little disappointing. Chances are, cutting it down from a feature-length 1:17 to a second-feature-length 0:53 didn't help—24 minutes is a lot to lose. Still, probably worth \$0.50.

Lights of Old Santa Fe, 1944, b&w. Frank McDonald (dir.), Roy Rogers, Trigger, George 'Gabby' Hayes, Dale Evans, Lloyd Corrigan. 1:18 [0:56]

Easy complaint: This movie doesn't belong in a "Gunslingers" set—which is true for some of the others as well, but even more so here. One gun gets drawn briefly at one point, but it's just as quickly taken out of action—and what this is, basically, is a musical. There's a ballet number and another dance number, there's a number by the Sons of the Pioneers *without* Roy Rogers, Dale Evans does a song or two (and at least two *with* Rogers), and Gabby Hayes shows that he can sing straight if he so chooses.

The plot? There's not much of it. Evans is the owner of a struggling rodeo (with Gabby as the manager), inherited from her father. She's just out of college and being courted by a rival rodeo owner. Rogers and the Sons are first signed by the rival, then let go—apparently because they want to be riders, not just singers—and try to Save the Day for Evans' rodeo. But one of the rival's hands sabotages them on the way to Albuquerque, setting horses loose and setting one wagon on fire thus panicking the other horses and destroying other wagons. Rogers tries to trick Evans into believing the rodeo actually happened, using a radio broadcast, but the trick is discovered shortly thereafter. Evans is about to sign over her rodeo *and herself* (as a bride) to the rival when...ah, but *of course* it all works out in the end. Hmm: Turns out the original was 22 minutes longer, a full-length feature, with—probably—more plot and even more music.

In any case, lots of good music, Dale Evans, Roy Rogers, Trigger, Gabby Hayes. Seen for what it is, it's an entertaining not-quite hour. If you're looking for a shoot-'em-up or a traditional western, you'll hate this; if

you like Rogers, Evans, Trigger and cowboy music, you'll like it just fine. \$1.00.

The Star Packer, 1934, b&w. Robert N. Bradbury (dir. & screenplay), John Wayne, Verna Hillie, George Hayes, Yakima Canutt. 0:53.

Another “B” programmer with lots of horse riding and, this time, *lots* of shooting as the town’s cattlemen take on the surprisingly large gang, but it’s not all that good a movie. It’s interesting on at least two counts: George Hayes is most definitely not “Gabby” in this flick, as he’s the serious upstanding Matt Mattlock (who’s also, to be sure, “The Shadow” and gangleader)—and Yakima Canutt, certainly the greatest stuntman in the first few decades of moviemaking (with 253 screen credits!) plays a character, not just doubling for stunt riding. The character’s named “Yak” and is a Native American—which Canutt wasn’t—and he’s John Wayne’s sidekick.

The basic plot: A gang is raiding all the cattle and stagecoaches in this town, and three sheriffs have been mysteriously shot down in the main street; “The Shadow” is in charge. Wayne and Yak show up and, in short order, solve the mystery, save the girl (she shows up as half-owner of Mattlock’s ranch—well, he’s not really Mattlock either—and shows spunk, and *of course* winds up married to Wayne), and save the town. Eh. Some fancy horse riding. Not a lot else. Maybe \$0.75

Disc 12

As usual for these 12-disc fifty-movie sets, one disc has six short movies: this one. These are all oaters, B-movie programmers of an hour or less, mostly low-budget short-plot flicks. Four with John Wayne; one each with Bob Steele and Crash Corrigan.

Texas Terror, 1935, b&w. Robert N. Bradbury (dir. & screenplay), John Wayne, Lucile Browne, LeRoy Mason, Fern Emmett, George Hayes. 0:51.

Wayne’s the newly-elected sheriff. The man who pretty much raised him comes by the office, shows the wad of cash he’s withdrawn from Wells Fargo to restock his ranch now that his daughter’s coming home in a few months, notes that he’d tied his horse up behind Wells Fargo, and rides off. Almost immediately thereafter, three gunmen rob Wells Fargo; in chasing them, Wayne winds up in a shootout with results that make him believe (a) that he—Wayne—shot the old man (we know it was one of the gunmen) and (b) that the old man might have been one of the bandits, since they dumped the money bag and one wad of bills on his corpse. After the town (jury?) concludes that the old man had to have been a bandit—after all, people saw him tie up his horse behind Wells Fargo—Wayne resigns his position, turning it back over to the old sheriff (George Hayes, not in the Gabby persona). Wayne goes off, grows a beard, and becomes...well, that’s not clear.

Lots'o'plot, much of it involving the daughter, and most of it makes just as much sense as the idea that Wayne wouldn't *mention* during the court hearing that the old man had told him his horse was tied up where it was. But hey, if you like lots of riding, some shooting, and a band of friendly Indians saving the day, I guess it's OK. Generously, \$0.75.

Wildfire, 1945, color. Robert Tansey (dir.), Bob Steele, Sterling Holloway, John Miljan, Eddie Dean. 0:59

An unusual entry: late (1945) and in color, but still a one-hour flick with lots of riding, lots of shooting, a couple of good fights—and a singing cowboy (actually a singing sheriff in this case, Eddie Dean) who gets the girl. The plot, not in the order it unfolds: a gang is rustling all the horses from ranches in one valley and blaming it on *Wildfire*, a wild stallion. It turns out horse theft is a sideline: the real motivation is for one gang member to buy up the ranches cheap, since he already has a contract to sell them to a big ranch for a big profit. Two itinerant horse-traders with a tendency to stay on the right side of the law wind up in the middle of this and expose it.

The color's a little faded, but the whole thing's good enough that I'd probably give it six bits—except for one thing: however they "digitized" this, at several points it looks like a projector losing its grip on film sprockets, losing chunks of the action and disrupting continuity. With that, it goes down to \$0.50.

Paradise Canyon, 1935, b&w. Carl Pierson (dir.), John Wayne, Marion Burns, Reed Howes, Earle Hodgins, Gino Corrado, Yakima Canutt. 0:53.

John Wayne again, this time as a government agent sent to investigate counterfeit traffic that may be connected to a medicine show. (One person went to jail for ten years for counterfeiting, and may be running such a show.) He finds the show—which has a habit of leaving towns suddenly, either for not paying debts or because the proprietor tends to drink his own tonic, go to town, bust things up and not pay for them (his tonic is "90% alcohol," which is 180 proof and should make it flammable). For that matter, Wayne helps the show evade arrest by getting them across the Arizona/New Mexico border just ahead of the law, and joins the show as a sharpshooter.

The next town is a New Mexico/Mexico border town—and turns out the medicine show's not really involved any more: instead, the counterfeiter, who framed the medicine man, is now operating out of a saloon on the Mexican side. One thing leads to another with lots of riding, lots of shooting and some true sharpshooting, and *of course* the good guys winning and John Wayne getting the girl—with a mildly cute surprise ending.

The highlight is probably the medicine man's pitch, a truly loopy piece of speechifying, including his assurance that he once knew a man without a tooth in his head...and that man became the best bass drum player he ever knew! All it takes is determination, and Doc Carter's Famous Indian Remedy.

Not great, not terrible. Once again we have Yakima Canutt doing something more than trick riding: he's the villain in the piece. (Wayne does *not* sing; the two singing entertainers in the medicine show are...well, that's six minutes I'll never get back again.) I'll give it \$0.75

The Lucky Texan, 1934, b&w. Robert N. Bradbury (dir. & writer), John Wayne, Barbara Sheldon, Lloyd Whitlock, George Hayes, Yakima Canutt. 0:55.

This time, John Wayne is Jerry Mason, just out of college and returned to the ranch of old geezer Jake Benson, who more or less brought him up. Mason finds that the ranch's cattle have all been rustled, but Benson's opening up a blacksmith shop in town. Wayne immediately starts working there. An early customer's horse had picked up a stone—a stone that, when Wayne looks at it, seems to have gold in it. (It must have been a thriving smithy, since the geezer refuses payment for dealing with the horse's problem...) Oh, and Benson's pretty young granddaughter is about to finish college (thanks in part to the geezer's monthly checks) and returning soon.

One thing leads to another, and we have Wayne and Benson (not a TV series, but it could be) getting really good pure gold out of the site where they figured the horse had been. When they go to sell it, the assayer pays them...and notes to his sidekick that he now "owned" most of Benson's cattle.

More plot; the villains trick the geezer into signing a deed to the ranch; the sheriff's son shoots the banker in a holdup just after Benson pays off the loan for the blacksmith shop (Benson seems like a likely culprit until John Wayne Saves the Day)...and more. As always, it all works out in the end, which involves the usual Wayne-and-the-girl wedding. No singing; lots of fist fights (with no phony sounds—lots of grunting, but not much more). Oddly enough, although two men are shot (and two others are shot *at*), there's not a single death in the movie. There is, on the other hand, Wayne surfing down a sluice riding on a tree branch—and a chase scene involving Hayes semi-driving a car (he'd never driven before) and the villains on a powered railway car, in an almost slapsticky/Keystone Kops sequence. (That long chase is also the only time in an old Western I've ever seen The Hero, Wayne in this case, jump from his horse to tackle the villain on *his* horse...and *miss*, tumbling down a hill.)

George Hayes gets to show his dramatic abilities pretending to be his sister (you'd have to see it—he'd played the lead in *Charley's Aunt* many

years before, and does a good job in drag), and although he now has Gabby Hayes' intonation and look, he's not playing the fool by any means, not even the sidekick—after all, it's his ranch and his blacksmith shop. Another one with Canutt doing more than stunt riding (although he did plenty of that—apparently chasing himself at one point), Yakima once again playing a bad guy (something he was very good at). (I would note that many of the reviews at IMDB call George Hayes “Gabby” or “Gaby” Hayes—but he didn't become Gabby Hayes until later on in his career.)

Maybe I'm getting soft as I near the end of this marathon, but this one seemed pretty good; I'll give it \$1.

Riders of the Whistling Skull, 1937, b&w. Mack V. Wright (dir.), Robert Livingston, Ray Corrigan, Max Terhune, Mary Russell, Roger Williams, Yakima Canutt, Fern Emmett, Chief Thundercloud. 0:58 [0:53]

A few archaeologists and a trio of cowboys known as The Three Mesquiteers are out to plunder a lost Indian city, or as they put it, rediscover it and recover the golden treasure. A bunch of Native Americans don't like this idea and attempt to discourage them. One half-Native American, who passes himself off as one of the party, had previously kidnapped the father of the beautiful young (female) anthropologist and has been torturing him to reveal the location of the treasure.

Of course, this being a B Western from the 1930s, the plunderers are the heroes and it's a great thing that they manage to shoot at least half a dozen Native Americans and bury more of them under a wildly implausible collapse of half a mountain. Naturally, it all ends “well,” with the most handsome of the Mesquiteers getting the girl and an older and plainer woman (another sort-of archaeologist) getting the less handsome of the Mesquiteers. (In this one, Yakima Canutt plays the American Indian guide who's in cahoots with the half-Native American.)

Reasonably well staged and with continuous action, but it's also blatantly offensive. If you can ignore that, maybe \$0.75.

Randy Rides Alone, 1934, b&w. Harry L. Fraser (dir.), John Wayne, Alberta Vaughn, George Hayes, Yakima Canutt, Earl Dwire. 0:53.

This cowboy riding along (and alone) tops a ridge and spots the roof of a building—a halfway house saloon. He hears the honky-tonk piano and goes in...only to discover that everybody's dead and the piano is a player piano. As he looks over the situation, including an open safe; the sheriff and his posse show up...and, naturally enough, arrest the cowboy. But we saw eyes moving in a painting on the wall...and after they've gone, a young woman steps out and inspects the scene.

Thus begins a story involving a hearing mute who runs a local store, the young woman breaking the cowboy out of jail so he can find the real killers, a gang hideaway for a gang run by...oh, let's not give it all away. Lots of riding, a fistfight or two, some shooting, and of course all ends well. This time, George Hayes (not at *all* in the "Gabby" persona) plays the lead villain (and the—spoiler—mute shopkeeper) and Yakima Canutt plays the chief henchman.

The flick seems padded even at 53 minutes, and Wayne is notable mostly for his young good looks. Generously, \$0.75.

Finishing Part 2

What's in Discs 7-12?

First, the full-length movies that might be worth watching again. There's *Showdown at Williams Creek* (\$1.50), *They Call Me Trinity* (\$2, and as close to a classic as you're likely to get here), *The Gun and the Pulpit* (didn't rewatch, but excellent: \$2) and *Rage at Dawn* (\$1.50). I count two "classics for the genre" and two probably worth watching again. Add three more fair ratings (\$1.25) and six more that are either mediocre full-length films or good "B" hour-or-less programmers (\$1). That comes to \$16.75 for 13 OK movies.

Add that to the \$17.75 for 13 OK movies in the first half (you can find the reviews in the January 2014 [Cites & Insights](#); OA investigations have slowed down movie watching just a bit!) and I get a total of 26 out of 50 movies that are OK or better and a total value of \$34.50. What's Amazon's current price for this set? \$11.15 at this writing, which makes this a pretty good deal. (Even at the "list" \$29, it's decent value.) Of course, you'll probably find most or all of these flicks available for free at the Internet Archive or elsewhere; unclear whether the picture quality there will be better or worse than on these DVDs.

What's next? There's still the humongous 250-movie *Mystery Collection* (only 15 more discs to go!), which I've now been watching for more than five years. But once I've watched Disc 46 of that collection, I'll start what looks to be a wildly entertaining 50-pack, with color, big production values, stars like Gordon Mitchell, Steve Reeves, Mark Forest, Ed Fury, Alan Steel and Gordon Scott, and equal-opportunity eye candy, with loads of beefcake *and* cheesecake along with mythology and generally silly plots. Yes, it's *Warriors*, "the best of legendary warriors," with Hercules against whoever's handy, his son(s) against various, Colossus, Thor, Samson, Ursus, Ulysses and more. It's a set so big it needs 13 discs (there aren't any really short movies in this lot). I'm looking forward to it.

The Back

Once every six months. That wasn't my plan for THE BACK, but the last two installments were in January and July 2015. (There isn't really a "plan" for this section, and that's increasingly true for other sections; in fact, it or the equivalent appeared three times each in 2014, 2013 and 2012.)

In any case, here we are again with little essays of no special meaning, if you choose to read them that way—and, as seems to happen at least once a year, one essay that's not so little. To wit:

The Low and the High of It

That's right—it's time for some hypothetical stereo system configurations and prices, based on the most recent version of *Stereophile's* Recommended Components feature (in this case, the October 2015 issue). These are all products that *Stereophile* regards as worthy for true audiophiles—components that the magazine's reviewers have formally reviewed, are widely available in the United States, are "among the best available" in their quality classes, and are recommended. Components only stay in the list if the magazine's writers and editors have had "continued experience" with them within the past three years.

"We try to include...every product that we have found to be truly excellent or that we feel represents good value for money." More specifically, Class A and A+ represents the "best attainable sound for a component of its kind, almost without practical considerations"—the money-no-object class—while Classes B through D are still highly recommended but represent more compromises between cost and quality. (Class E, for loudspeakers only, represents "entry-level products" that are *still* musically satisfying.)

I don't regard *Stereophile* as gospel by any means, but this seems to be the only ongoing compilation of its kind, and I suspect almost everything in these lists will either reproduce music accurately or make good music (that distinction is significant: a couple of the reviewers have fairly marked predilections for components that *make* pretty music more than they reproduce accurately).

What I try to do here is to assemble the *most* expensive and *least* expensive stereo (not surround) systems, either with entirely Class A and A+ products or with entirely products below Class A. I've traditionally configured systems with only CD players, then added the costs of adding LP playback.

This time, I'm adding two more alternatives: music servers as alternative sources and portable music systems, the latter consisting of a player and a set of headphones. I'm also trying to include cost of cables.

Do note that these are all *stereo* systems; when you go to surround, and especially systems like the new Dolby Atmos that ideally involve multiple overhead channels, the sky really is the limit, since such systems are likely to involve *at least* ten speaker systems and nine amplification channels. Considering the prices of the most expensive speakers and amplifiers here, you could get into seven figures without much trouble...

Part of the reason I find this interesting is the comparison to other consumer goods sold as performing a function, rather than as works of art or rarities. So, for example, I looked at *Consumer Reports* online and checked the ratio between highest price and lowest price for recommended items of a particular sort—which seems reasonable, since everything in this list is recommended (and *CR*'s bar for recommending automobiles is relatively low).

Some examples:

- **Upright vacuum cleaners:** A range of 7:1.
- **Digital cameras:** A range of 21:1, from the most expensive prosumer SLR to the cheapest point-and-shoot.
- **TVs, 50" and up:** A range of 7:1.
- **Front-load HE washing machines:** 4:1
- **Automobiles:** A range of 6.4:1, from the cheapest recommended small car (around \$17K) to the most expensive recommended sports car (around \$110K). Within any type of car, the range is 5:1 or less.

Sound systems are different—very different.

Let's start with the simplest systems: portable systems, where we'll assume that you get the digital music to the player via a computer.

Portable System, Class A: The Low

This one may surprise you: the Ponoplayer, conceived by Neil Young and made possible by \$6.2 million in Kickstarter funding. \$399. Add the \$200 Thinksound On1 headphones (rounding all prices up to the nearest dollar) for a total of \$599. Remember: this is for Class A sound.

Portable System, Class A: The High

Astell&Kern's AK240 Portable Player goes for \$2,500. The Audeze LCD-X headphones go for \$1,699, making the total \$4,199.

That's only a 7:1 ratio, which is surprisingly low.

Portable System, Class B-D: The Low

Problem is, there's only one portable player listed below Class A (there are only three in all): the Sony NW-ZX2 at \$1,200. I'm going to list two headphones, one of which I own, because that one strikes me as too specialized for portable use: the \$36 Howard Leight Sync Stereo Earmuff, which is really a set of passive-noise-reduction hearing protectors (you

know, for running lawnmowers or power tools) that happen to have pretty good earphones [with protection against very high volume] built in. I suspect most folks would prefer the \$79 Grado SR60e for use when just playing tunes, not vacuuming or running a chainsaw. Technically, the total here is either \$1,236 or \$1,279—but I suspect most sensible buyers would go for the Ponoplayer even if it is Class A, bringing the total to \$435 or \$478.

Portable System, Class B-D: The High

Same player, the Sony NW-ZX2, \$1,200. For headphones, the PSB M4U 2, \$399 (these have active noise reduction). That's a total of \$1,599—only 25% higher than the Sony/Grado combo or, realistically, 3.3 times as much as the Ponoplayer/Grado combo.

Now, we'll get back to regular stereo systems.

CD-Based System, Class A: The Low

It appears that Oppo has this class of CD player pretty much locked up with the \$499 BDP-103, which is a universal player (that is, it plays Blu-ray, DVD Audio, DVD and SACD as well as CDs).

For the low end, you'd buy an integrated amplifier: the Bel Canto C7R at \$2,595. (The alternative, separate preamp and power amp, would be at least \$4,089.)

Speakers? Your choices for full-range sound are the \$15,998 Revel Ultima Studio2 (speaker prices are for a pair or a single subwoofer) or a combination of the \$1,499 KEF LS50 Anniversary Model and \$3,499 Paradigm Reference Sub 15, for a total of \$4,998.

So that's a total of \$8,092 or \$19,092 for Class A sound. *But wait...*

You're going to need cables. Those don't come in Class ratings, so I'll just look at the low and high, assuming 1m pairs for interconnects and whatever's specified that's at least 2m for speaker cables. (Lots of them are 8 or 10 feet, more reasonable lengths.) Low end for interconnects really is low: the AudioQuest Tower at \$25. For speaker cables, there's the Kimber 4PR for \$137 (ten foot pair). That's only \$162 more. Add another \$137 (or less?) to connect the subwoofer if you're going for a cheaper full-range system.

System total: \$8,391 or \$19,253.

CD-Based System, Class A: The High

Hold your breath...now, let it out, slowly...

Ready?

The CD player is now the DCS Vivaldi, which is *not* a universal player; it costs a mere \$108,496. No, I am *not* making this up.

You'll certainly want both a line-level preamp and a power amplifier (or a pair of "monoblocks," single-channel amplifiers). For the former,

there's the \$55,000 Boulder 2110. For the latter, dartZeel's NHB-458 monoblock runs 151,000 CHF/pair, which at today's exchange rate is \$150,062.

Speakers? That's easy: the Wilson Audio Specialties Alexandria XLF, \$210,000 a pair.

So that's \$313,558—without interconnects and speaker cables.

For interconnects, there's TARA Labs Zero Evolution at \$18,000—but since there's now a preamp, you'll need two for \$36,000 total. Speaker cables? TARA Labs again, the Omega Evolution, \$32,000 for an 8' pair.

System total: \$381,358, for a CD-only system.

That's a bit more than 37 times the price of the cheapest all-Class-A system.

CD-Based System, Class B-E: The Low

This one gets tricky. If you take *Stereophile* literally and don't require brand-new equipment, here's the system: a \$25 Sony PlayStation 1 as a CD player (*I am not making this up!*), the \$100 Lepaj LP7498E integrated amplifier, and the Dayton Audio B652 speakers, all of \$40 a pair.

That comes to \$165, which makes \$162 for interconnects and speaker cables seem awfully high by comparison (I'm guessing anybody buying in this range is going to get their interconnects and cables from Amazon or Radio Shack and spend no more than \$15 combined, but...). Total system price: \$327.

If you want new equipment and you'd just as soon avoid Class E, here's your system: the \$299 NAD C 516BEE CD player; the same \$100 Lepaj LP7498E integrated amplifier; and Pioneer's SP-BS22-LR speakers at \$130, for a total of \$529 (\$691 including cables), which is pretty good.

Note that the cheapest Class A system costs 12 times as much, and the most expensive one costs 551 times as much for a CD-only system.

CD-Based System, Class B-D: The High

Start with the \$2,995 La Rosita Alpha CD player (most expensive CD players are Class A or A+).

Add \$2,295 for Parasound's Halo P 7preamp and \$19,900 for the Allnic A-5000 DHT amplifier(s): it's a pair of monoblocks).

For speakers, the Nola Metro Grand Reference Gold. They're not Class A, but they are \$33,000.

You're up to \$58,190, but don't forget \$68,000 for interconnects and cables. OK, OK, so if you're in Class B-D, you're *not* going to buy the *most* expensive cables. Stepping back, there's the Stealth Sakra interconnects at a mere \$11,000 each (\$22,000 since you have a preamp to connect) and Wireworld Platinum Eclipse 7, \$24,000 for a three-meter pair: that brings us down to \$46,000 for interconnections.

Total price: \$104,190 or \$126,190, depending. At \$104,190, that's less than a third the price of the most expensive Class A system, albeit twelve

times as much as an all-Class-A system that's not the most expensive you can buy.

CD-based systems: summing up

Class A, cheapest: \$8,391

Class A, most expensive: \$381,358.

Class B-E, cheapest: \$327 or \$691.

Class B-D, most expensive: \$104,190.

Adding Vinyl, Class A: The Low

You want to play your LPs. That's easy: add a turntable, arm, cartridge and phono preamp—although that doesn't always mean four separate decisions.

The Linn Sondek LP12 starts at \$4,320, but that does include turntable, arm and cartridge. The Lehmann Decade phono preamp costs \$2,099. Add another interconnect (from phono preamp to main preamp) at \$25, and you're up to \$6,444 to add LP playback, or \$14,835 for the complete system.

Adding Vinyl, Class A: The High

The Continuum Audio Labs Caliburn sells for \$200,000. That *does* include a turntable, but not a cartridge: figure \$15,000 for the Clearaudio Goldfinger Statement.

Add the Ypsilon VPS-100 for \$26,000, and we're up to \$241,000—plus another \$18,000 for another interconnect. So it looks like \$259,000 just to add vinyl playback, or \$640,358 for the full system.

The ratio for Class A systems is 43:1.

Adding Vinyl, Class B-D: The Low

Here's a true bargain, and I say that without a trace of irony, if you're involved in high-end record playback: the Music Hall USB-1, which for \$249 gets you a turntable, arm, cartridge *and* USB output for converting vinyl to WAV files. No additional interconnect needed.

That brings the system total to either \$571 or \$940—or, if *all* you want to do is play records, buy the AudioEngine A2+ powered speakers at \$249 and you're out \$523 total (don't forget the interconnect!). So the ratio for the most expensive all-recommended LP-playing system to the cheapest is 1,224:1—*more than a thousand to one*. For all recommended equipment. That would be comparable to the most expensive recommended automobile costing \$20.8 million or the most expensive consumer-grade (“prosumer”) digital camera costing \$220,000.

Adding Vinyl, Class B-D: The High

Start with the PTP Audio Solid12 turntable: \$3,300. Add the Sperling Audio TA-1 tonearm: \$9,750. Finish with the DS Audio DS-W1 at \$8,500—but that includes a phono preamp, so you can skip that and the interconnect. Total: \$21,550, bringing the system total up to \$125,740—for a system that never enters into Class A territory. Even so, it's nearly 240 times as expensive as the cheapest non-Class-A LP system or 8.5 times as expensive as an all-Class-A LP system.

CD and Vinyl systems: summing up

Class A, cheapest: \$14,835.

Class A, most expensive: \$640,358.

Class B-E, cheapest: \$571 or \$940.

Class B-D: most expensive: \$125,471.

But you say you want a music server as well, either in place of or in addition to the vinyl playback?

In Class A and A+, the low price is \$2,000 for Sony's HAP-Z1ES Media Player with one terabyte of storage; the high is Meridian's Sooloos System at \$10,500 (which I think includes two terabytes of storage).

In Classes B-D...well, sorry, there aren't any.

Summing Up

On a couple of occasions, I've said what I might buy if I had limitless funds, plenty of room space, enough time to listen to lots of music, and a household that liked having music on all the time.

Realistically, what I *would* buy is the \$468 combination of Ponoplayer and Grado SR-60e, or I might kick in an extra \$20 and go for the Grado SR-80e. (I'm pretty happy with my Sansa Fuze 8GB player and Sennheiser PX-100 II headphones, the two of which probably cost \$130 total, but then I'm old, with an old man's ears.)

But if I *did* want a hotshot music system, I suspect I'd get an Oppo BDP-103 at \$499, an NAD D 3020 integrated amp at \$499 and a pair of GoldenEar Technology Triton One loudspeakers at \$5,000. Throw in \$162 for cables and interconnects (I don't believe I would hear the difference in big-buck cables, or that I could bring myself to believe that there was such a difference), and we're talking \$6,160. But that's me.

How does all this compare to a year ago, when I did this exercise (without portable players or digital servers)? It's quite similar, in many cases the same components; where there are changes, the newer systems are typically a little *less* expensive.

For \$6K, You Get Glorious Mono—er, “360° Surround”

The October 2015 *Sound & Vision* devotes its full-page “Premiere Design” feature to the Poet Audio Pandoretta 360° Wireless Sound System—and it’s a doozy, given that what it is, is a monaural Bluetooth speaker.

Ah, but not just *any* Bluetooth speaker. This one is an 18” wide by 6” high by 12” deep box of stainless steel with lots of circular cutouts, a nice-looking industrial object if that’s your style. It contains four tweeters, two midrange drivers and one “woofer,” a 170 watt amplifier and a Bluetooth receiver. It’s supposedly designed to radiate sound “nearly 360 degrees,” so you presumably want to put it out in the middle of the room on its snazzy wooden stand. (Without the stand, it’s a mere \$3,800 or so.)

I’ve seen one bizarre review that says this monaural loudspeaker is somehow *preferable* to a full-fledged surround-sound system because, I dunno, the single mono sound source is more *surrounding*. More than one writeup claims that this device is an *upgrade* from a stereo system. The *Sound & Vision* puff piece quotes the company as saying that mono is “an ideal alternative” to stereo because people move around while listening to music. While, apparently, listening to it so intently that they’ll appreciate the difference between a \$3,800 speaker and a, say, \$300 Bluetooth speaker.

This thing is “wireless”—no remote, no on-off switch (it powers up automatically when it senses a Bluetooth signal). Except for one thing: while the photos I’ve seen make it *look* entirely wireless, there’s either one fairly thick wire involved that might interfere with putting this in the middle of the room—an AC power cord—or that 170watt amplifier would run for five or ten minutes at any reasonable volume before exhausting a set of batteries. (None of the reviews I checked said *anything* about whether it was AC-powered or battery operated; I’m going to assume AC-powered.)

Hey, if you think this \$6K speaker and stand look snazzy and sound great, and you have your music on a Bluetooth device (e.g. a smartphone), more power to you. If you believe that mono is somehow more surrounding than stereo...well, maybe you’ll understand what the designer means by “phonetic corpus.”

More Fun with Stereo

Let’s look at a few other interesting audio devices, interesting for one reason or another. Some people will find some of these to be excellent purchases. I won’t argue with that.

Boulder Amplifiers 2110 Line Preamplifier

I was impressed by this product, reviewed in the March 2015 *Stereophile* (by Michael Fremer, who is apparently independently wealthy and has ears that would outdo any bat). And why not? Even though it’s a “line

preamp” (which means it doesn’t actually preamplify—that’s what a phono preamp does), it weighs 113 pounds (in two boxes) and costs a cool \$54,000.

Technically, this one will do some amplification—but fundamentally it’s a device to switch sources and act as a volume control. It does that very well. For \$54,000, it should.

I was impressed not only with the weight and price but also the power consumption, given that this is basically a fancy volume control. When it’s “idle”—there’s no signal being preamplified—it uses 85 watts. Our whole house uses about 60 watts at idle, but that’s just us (200-300 watts is apparently typical, thanks to all those chargers and set-top boxes and other things). When the unit’s running? Up to 240 watts. It’s solid state, not tubed.

Speaking of parasitic power consumption, there’s the Simaudio Moon Evolution 740P line preamp reviewed in the May 2015 *Stereophile*. It’s also a preamp that doesn’t really preamplify, but it’s much lighter and much cheaper: a mere \$9,500. And it consumes only 20 watts at idle—but the review is *very* clear that you’re supposed to leave it on all the time. Not only does it take 400 hours of playing before it works as well as it should, but if you turn it off, it takes *three days* of operation to warm up fully. But hey, that’s basically just another set-top box consumption, so who cares?

Just a quick note about two solid-state power amplifiers reviewed in the August 2015 *Stereophile*, both expensive (\$29,500 and \$15,000 respectively), neither of which should seemingly need more than a fraction of a watt when not actually amplifying. The Ayre Acoustics MX-R Twenty uses 45 watts in *standby mode* (that is, it’s not really on) and, gulp, 120 watts “operating/no signal.” The Simaudio Moon Evolution 860A—there’s Simaudio again—uses 55 watts at idle, and, sure enough, you’re supposed to leave it on all the time.

Hmm...come October 2015, and *Stereophile* reviews a 22 watt per channel (tubed) integrated amplifier that consumes 320 watts to put out 22 watts—except that the \$4,450 unit looks to put out something like *one* watt at 1% distortion (what’s usually considered the clipping point, but the editor gives tube units 3% because, you know, *tubes*) which makes 320 watts seem like it’s mostly a space heater. And in reviewing the Krell Solo 575 power amplifier, a \$22,500 beast that uses 131 watts idling but only one watt in standby mode (it *can* consume 2260 watts—if you have it on its own dedicated 20 amp circuit, that is), Michael Fremer shows his “let them eat solar!” sensibilities when he says “And these days, power inefficiency is out of fashion.” *Not* that it’s an actual issue; nope, it’s *out of fashion*.

This one’s a cheapie...sort of

“This one” being the Wilson Audio Specialties Duette Series 2 loudspeaker—a pair costs a mere \$22,500, including integral stands and crossovers. It’s a small speaker and you’ll probably need a subwoofer or two to get full-range audio response but it measures well.

How can \$22,500 be a bargain, when Class A speakers go for as little as \$5,000 (see above)? Because these are from Wilson Audio Specialties...where, as the review notes, the *average* speaker price is \$69,325 a pair.

As the reviewer says “one can fairly assume that almost all owners of Wilson speakers are people of above-average means.” Indeed.

It's worth it!

This one isn't about one particular item; instead, it's about the editorial in the June 2015 *Sound & Vision*, occasioned by a reader—one with a really good home stereo and TV—asking whether all the hot new upgrades (e.g., “7.1.4” sound, where you not only have seven stereo and surround channels and one subwoofer channel, but also four speaker systems installed in the ceiling).

I'd like to say the editor's response was “sometimes, if you have the money, after you've made sure the upgrade makes a difference *to you*.” But that's not what we get. Instead we get “sometimes,” but more often than not lately it's been ‘yes.’”

Specifically, the editor's apparently saying that for anybody who cares about sound & vision at all (noting that this is the low-money popular magazine, not the high-end *Stereophile*), it's worth it to go from a good HDTV to a 65” ultra high definition TV that you watch from seven feet away (so that UHD makes a difference) and it's worth it to “actually remodel your living room to accommodate Atmos ceiling speakers...to hear that bird in the Atmos ‘Amaze’ trailer flap fully around your room above your head...”

When an editor tells me I should remodel my living room so I can hear a bird flap around the room above my head, my response may involve a bird of sorts, but it won't be flapping around above my head. Won't have wings either.

A Universal Value Test

That's the headline for a full-page ad/essay from William F. Low of AudioQuest on page 76 of the May 2015 *Stereophile*. The subheads, on separate lines:

A cup of coffee doesn't cost \$4 at Starbucks®.

An Ethernet cable from AudioQuest doesn't cost \$10,000.

He's grumping about discussions of AudioQuest's most expensive Ethernet cable, starting with a *Register* piece titled “\$10,000 Ethernet Cable Promises Bonkers MP3 Experience” and calling the cable a case of “audiophile nonsense turned up to 11.”

Low's right about the headlines: you can get a “tall” (that is, small) cup of plain coffee at Starbucks for \$1.75 (that's what he says: I don't do Starbucks, so can't say, but I'm sure it's less than \$4)...and you can get the cheapest AudioQuest Ethernet cable for \$25. Ah, but you *can* spend \$4 on

a Starbucks “customized latte,” easily, and the top AudioQuest Ethernet cable *does* cost \$7,995 for a 12-meter run. That’s not \$10,000, but it’s a lot of money for an Ethernet cable.

Low says that the \$7,995 cable will make a “clearly audible improvement”—and, later, one that will be “heard on anything”—over even the next most expensive AudioQuest Ethernet cable.

He thinks the purchase of, and choice of level of, and AudioQuest cable should be whether it’s “the least expensive way to make the most difference” in a system. This does not allow for the possibility that the “audible difference” between two cables carrying digitized error-checked packets of information (i.e., Ethernet) is likely to be self-fulfilling: if you know it’s a \$7,995 cable, *it’s gotta sound better* than a mere \$25 or \$2.50 cable.

Maybe so. It’s essentially impossible to prove otherwise, no matter how many double-blind tests fail to show such a difference.

Making Music or Reproducing It?

Some of you already know the distinction between sound equipment that *makes* music—that makes everything it plays “musical” or “pretty” and equipment designed to *reproduce* music accurately.

I was reminded of this distinction when reading a joint review of two moderately-priced “ampDACs”: devices that combine modest integrated amps and headphone amps with high-resolution digital-to-analog conversion. The two cost \$549 and \$799 respectively; they’re not ultra-cheap, but they’re not very expensive either.

One of them has an interesting characteristic: there’s a *big* frequency boost centered around 70Hz (mid-bass): seven decibels. It’s not a sample failure or some defeatable setting: the company says it believes the unit will sell to a largely non-audiophile audience and the distortion (‘cuz that’s what it is) will provide “a touch more impact to the small, relatively inexpensive speakers and mid-line ‘phones” the company thinks you’ll use with an \$800 amplifier.

You can get very good speakers and remarkably good headphones for a whole lot less than \$800. But never mind. This spokesperson says that, if you *do* have good speakers you’ll hear this considerable boost as “a little more ambience or presence.” In other words, *prettier music*, even if less accurate. Hey, as long as the deliberate distortion is called out in the ads and packaging, OK—but I’ll bet it isn’t.

Proofreaders Cost Money

Full disclosure: *Cites & Insights* lacks copyeditors, proofreaders, peer reviewers, all that stuff. Also: free. But here’s page 44 of the April 2015 *Sound & Vision*, at the end of the second page of a review of a Logitech Harmony universal remote control, midway through the last paragraph on the page:

Solely as a home automation controller, it works fantastically well with several devices and hubs but still has a ways to go before it's a truly universal home automation controller—and that issue may well be solved with the release of the Home Hub Extender. As a combo home A/V and home automation controller, there's no doubt that the Harmony Ultimate

Page 45: a full-page speaker ad. Page 46: “The Greatest Soundbar Ever,” headline for a review of a \$1,019 soundbar (an April Fool's gag, as it happens).

The last few words—what there's no doubt about? Lost to the vagaries of typesetting and non-proofreading.

Sound & Vision puts most or all of its reviews on its website, so I could [look this up](#). Here's the remainder of the last paragraph, after the word “Ultimate” (the remote control costs \$350—and for what it's supposed to do, that may actually not be outrageous):

Home is what all other DIY home automation systems should aspire to be. It's truly a win/win device, and it's highly recommended.

Huh. I wouldn't have guessed that final sentence based on the review: it was clearly good but not clearly so great—at least right now—as to be highly recommended. But it's here because of those missing 22 words.

Massive

Just at a guess, one might describe the Sperling-Audio L-1 turntable (a mere \$35,950, but that's without a tonearm) as massive.

At least according to Michael Fremer, who in his review in the August 2015 *Stereophile* uses “massive” four times in the first four paragraphs (and “beefy” once as well), and several more times later. Consider the first two sentences in “The Sperling's design”:

The L-1's massive aluminum-alloy platter alone weighs 60 lbs; the entire turntable assembly weighs about 110 lbs. The massive bearing assembly bolts to the lower aluminum V-shaped wing, which sits on three massive, adjustable feet of machined aluminum...

Actually, reading the review, this turntable is not only massive, it's a massive pain: after a complex procedure to set up the spindle, you have to heft that 60lb. platter and lower it over the bearing—and *it may not fit* if the temperature's not just right. Oh, and the speed-adjustment dials are set where they can be easily nudged accidentally. And the turntable's apparently microphonic: with a stylus on a record and the player at rest, tapping the record label gently produces a “loud, deep *thump*” through the speakers.

Vertical tracking force adjustment involves adjusting three threaded weights—*none of which can be locked into place*. (Oh, wait, that's for the company's matching tonearm, which adds a mere \$9,750, bringing the

price up to a bargain \$45,700. The turntable doesn't have an arm lock, doesn't have antiskating, and offers no provision for strain relief on the wiring...but hey, it's *massive*.)

I initially used "enthusiastic" in describing Fremer's review. Rereading it, that's not quite true: he describes a heavy, expensive, fussy-to-set-up device that isn't as accurate as it could be. I guess you only get so much for \$45,700 (not including cartridge, to be sure). Some folks might even be massively disappointed. So to speak.

Odd Similes

This one, in the May 2015 *Stereophile* "Listening" column by Art Dudley, just struck me as odd:

It isn't every day that I make coffee by grinding the beans by hand and bringing the water to the precisely correct temperature (*never boiling!*).

And some days, a drive in the car is nothing more than a way to get to the post office and back, and never mind that I haven't cleaned the brake calipers for a couple of months.

Huh? Unless Dudley means "by hand" *literally*—that is, without the use of an electric grinder or coffee mill—he's equating a five-minute morning ritual with "cleaning the brake calipers" on your car before taking it for a drive. (As it happens, I've gone to ground coffee recently, but for 30+ years I did what he seems to think is brake-caliper-cleaning effort each morning. Usually while half-asleep.)

Speaking of odd similes, in the October 2015 *Stereophile* Michael Fremer compares "those who say the vinyl resurgence isn't happening" to "deniers of the Holocaust and Climate Change." Is there a variant of the Godwin Rule for things like this? (For what it's worth, I don't "deny" that LP sales have increased and that it's become an interesting, if small, business.)

How does \$1,200 sound?

That's one line in a generally enthusiastic May 2015 *Sound & Vision* review of the BenQ HT1075 DLP Projector—and that's a good price for a video projector. But it's what precedes that that makes this noteworthy: namely, the assertion that a 70-inch flat screen TV will cost at least \$1,500, while this \$1,200 device can give you a picture three or more times as large (by area). Wow! I can save \$300 and get three times the picture!

Except...a bit later, it does note that you need a screen, with a 96" screen costing \$580 or more. That 96" screen won't get you anywhere near "three or more times as large" a picture as a 70" screen, to be sure: that requires a 120"-diagonal screen. Fortunately, prices have come down enough that you can buy such a monster for \$830 or so.

How does \$2,000 sound? Fine, maybe—and that’s a more realistic figure. This assumes that you have a place where a 120”-diagonal (that’s *ten feet* from corner to corner) won’t feel grotesquely large and out of place. If you do, I’m guessing that you want something fancier than a \$1,200 projector, and that you can afford it too.

Science or Blather?

Ken C. Pohlmann has been saying silly (and sometimes less silly) things about audio technology for many years, mostly in *Sound & Vision* (under several names), currently in his “Signals” column.

The July/August 2015 column, titled “The Last and Greatest Frontier,” is about “an audio problem that seems insurmountably difficult”—crappy sound from tiny speakers in your phone.

See, Pohlmann buys into the idea that “some of the smartest audio engineers in the world” are going to make those tiny speakers sound *great*—he suggests getting “the high-fidelity sound of a symphony orchestra fill[ing] my room.” How?

Pohlmann admits that the laws of physics are involved—to make audible sound requires moving air, and significant quantities of it—but says:

The only way to overcome that will be through the leverage of magnificently complex digital signal processing. Countless lines of code and blazing-fast computation will analyze the music waveform and precondition it to counterbalance the severe nonlinearities and limitations of the transducer. At the output, when the data causes the microspeaker to disturb the air around the phone, it will sound awesome.

He’s *not* talking about holding the phone up to your ear and hearing a good, if miniature, simulacrum of a symphony orchestra: he’s talking about “lay[ing] my phone on the table and hit[ting] the play button” and getting *room-filling* sound. Through algorithms. Powered by the battery in a smartphone, which is not only pushing that air but carrying out those blazing fast millions of lines of code.

Personally, I wouldn’t hold my breath. The laws of physics still come into play.

Geography: It’s Tough!

In his August 2015 “Listening” column in *Stereophile*, Art Dudley discusses a visit to The Soundsmith, a small manufacturer of electronics, loudspeakers and phono cartridges. Here’s the key sentence fragment and accompanying footnote:

The Soundsmith...also happens to be one of only two makers of high-fidelity phono cartridges in all of North America (the other being Grado Labs).¹

1. Shure Brothers phono cartridges are now made in Juarez, Mexico...

What? You thought Mexico was part of North America? Apparently Art Dudley (and the editors, copyeditors and proofreaders at *Stereophile*) knows better.

What Does Five Stars Mean?

I was a little surprised by two different speaker system reviews in the September 2015 *Sound & Vision* (well, *three* actually: we'll get to that)—one with five stars for performance and four for value, the other with 4.5 stars for performance and 4.5 stars for value. In almost all cases, *Sound & Vision* now seems to assume that *of course* everybody wants five speakers and a subwoofer, so their prices can be a little odd, but...

Anyway: the first system's main speakers are PSB ImagineT3s; they cost \$7,498 a pair. (The total 5.1-channel price is \$11,855—the surround, center and subwoofer are much cheaper). They are apparently very good floor standing loudspeakers.

The second system's main speakers (actually, all of them except the subwoofer) are Dayton Audio B652-Air. For \$60 a pair. (The total 5.1-channel price is \$299: the subwoofer costs \$119.)

Now, by all accounts, Dayton Audio's little speakers are remarkably good for the money. (The \$60/pair units have air motion transformer tweeters; with regular dome tweeters, Daytons cost \$40/pair—or \$70/pair *including amplification*.)

A little digression: back when air motion transformer tweeters were from Heil and patented by Dr. Oskar Heil, the first speaker system I know of to use them was from ESS and replaced the floor-standing ESS Translinears that I owned for decades: the new tweeters added substantially to the price. Now that the patent's expired, the air motion transformer design is apparently so expensive to build that it adds, what, \$10 a speaker to the retail price.

Anyway: how can it be that a little \$30 box gets a 4.5-star performance rating, just half a star below a \$3,729 floor-stander? The reviewer addresses that:

Our ratings generally measure a product's merit relative to other products in its price range, not in absolute terms.

In other words: these are a whole lot better than most \$60/pair speakers. I don't doubt that. By that standard, *Consumer Reports* should have judged the Yugo as a top pick: it was almost certainly the best car you could buy legally in the U.S. for \$3,995 new. It just wasn't much of a car. (I suspect

the Dayton Audio is a *much* more reputable speaker than the Yugo was a car, given that *Stereophile* also recommends it, albeit in a special entry-level class.)

The third? The Arcam Solo Soundbar System—yep, a soundbar. One that sells for a cool \$2,300. Which is mildly remarkable—but not so much as the graph showing frequency response. There’s a pretty substantial valley—five to ten decibels—from roughly 2kHz to 15kHz. A sidebar to the review calls it a “severe mid- to high-frequency rolloff” and confirms that it’s *intentional*: the manufacturer says that accurate response above 3kHz would be “zingy and nasty.” You might think that, with such an expensive soundbar, there might be a switch, so that you could decide whether you wanted smoooooth or accurate. But no: Arcam knows best. And, although they feel obliged to justify their decision, the editors give the system one of those Top Picks logos that seem to show up on more than half of all their reviews, making “top” an interesting term. Yes, *of course* both the Dayton and PSB also get the high honor, as does every other speaker system in the issue. It’s sort of like a classroom where 80% of the students get As and the rest get B+: they’re *all* winners!

Masthead

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