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The Front

The Summer Issue

Some years, I've done a blog post to celebrate the start of stone fruit season—the best season for local farmers' markets, even if it can get a little hot at times. (But it's a dry heat: 102° F feels like 102° F, not like 110 or higher.) I never got around to that for 2017, so here it is instead.

We got lucky with apricots this year: the season started a bit early, quality was excellent (Blenheim, Modesto, Patterson and other varieties) and we still got some first-rate apricots through late July.

Peachcots—from one vendor—were only around two weeks, but thoroughly enjoyable while they were here.

This year's local cherries were first-rate, at least the Bings and specialty reds; Rainiers rarely seem to do as well here as in Washington, but they weren't bad. The local crop is gone, but as I write this (July 26), "northwest" cherries (Washington State) are doing great and at very low prices at local supermarkets. (\$1.77/lb. for a one-day sale last week, \$1.99/lb. this week.) Whereas I can't imagine bothering with "fresh" apricots that aren't locally picked, cherries seem to survive the two-state journey quite well.

Saturn peaches? (Or donut peaches, if that's your preferred term.) Magnificent. Luscious. Ditto some of the freestone varieties.

Inside This Issue

Media: Mystery Collection, Part 8.....	2
The Back	17

Right now, we're in the heart of the pluot season, also rich with nectarines and plums. I'm hoping for a few more weeks eating way too much fairly-local, usually-organic, first-rate stone fruit... Oh, and new this week: plurins—peach-nectarine hybrids that are much like freestone peaches but firmer and without the fuzz. Wowser.

If you're looking for Serious Research or Important Professional Insights, see the title here: this is The Summer Issue. I can recommend the January, April, May, June and July issues—and of course *GOAJ2 Gold Open Access Journals 2011-2016*—for those in need of substance. (I'm working

on something that might or might not yield a partial followup to the January issue, but if it happens, it's quite a ways off.)

Meanwhile, enjoy some fresh air, take advantage of your own farmers' markets and parks, and feel free to skip the rest of this less-than-weighty issue, even if it does have an essay that was three years in the making.

Media

Mystery Collection, Part 8

Discs 43-48 of this 60-disc, 250-movie megacollection.

Disc 43

Bail Out (orig. *W.B., Blue and the Bean*), 1989, color, "video," Max Kleven (dir. & writer), David Hasselhoff (star and producer), Linda Blair, Tony Brubaker, Thomas Rosales Jr., John Vernon, Gregory Scott Cummins, Wayne Montario. 1:27.

We start with a thoroughly misanthropic bail bondsman, who drives his classic car to his mistress's (I guess), has a quickie, then drives to work in a serious beater. Shortly we're introduced to the three guys he relies on—for as little money as possible—to make sure bailed folks show up. One's David Hasselhoff (*W.B.*, which stands for Whitebread), back story unknown; one's a former pro football player; one's Hispanic with no apparent means of support. After seeing how clever they are individually, we see them in action together.

The person in question is a beautiful young heiress arrested because she was driving with her boyfriend in a car with 40 pounds of cocaine in the trunk. She says he was just some guy she met at a bar. She's also supposedly disinherited. Anyway, the plot starts there, goes through several kidnappings, a number of drug lords, a demand for \$5 million (the street price of the seized drugs) to her father (whose companies were pretty clearly being used to transport and store the cocaine), lots of shootings, and...well, it's silly to try to keep up with the action. Let's just say they—very definitely "they" (the trio and the young woman) conspire to get a better payday than the bail bondsman had in mind.

As a cable TV movie (my assumption: too cheaply done for a real movie, too much nudity—including the manager of a hot-sheet motel who greets renters in the altogether—for network TV: turns out I was wrong, it was a "direct to VHS" job), it's—well, it's Hasselhoff. It's amusing (if you discount all the shootings, but they all seem to be bad guys, although in this case it's hard to tell who the *good* guys would be). It is a long way from classic cinema. Oh, and it includes the assumption by various Hispanics that *nobody in LA can understand Spanish*. The quartet (the daughter and the three operatives) make an

amusing group. What more can I say? Charitably, taking it as a so-bad-it's-good action comedy, \$1.25.

The Night They Took Miss Beautiful, 1977, color, TV movie. Robert Michael Lewis (dir.), Gary Collins, Chuck Connors, Henry Gibson, Victoria Principal, Gregory Sierra, Phil Silvers, Sheree North, Stella Stevens. 1:40 [1:37]

See, this is what happens when you take a three-month break from watching old movies. As I was thinking about doing this writeup, I thought “I could be really silly and suggest that this mediocre TV-movie was in the Mystery Collection, not some collection selling the presence of Name actors.” Ah, but here it is: in the Mystery Collection. (It was pretty clear it was a TV movie before I checked IMDB.)

The biggest mystery is why the collection of mostly-TV stars you can see in the summary took part in this exercise in poor low-budget “drama.” I guess money is the answer.

The plot, such as it is: We start in the Miss Beautiful beauty pageant, where emcee Phil Silvers tells bad jokes, introduces the five semifinalists who will be flown via seaplane to the site of the final contest (huh?), and does the worst job of singing a bad beauty pageant closing song I've ever endured. Then we get the incredibly old prop-job seaplane, with two “cleaners” being left at the plane by ground personnel who take them at their word that they'll walk back to the Miami tower. Then the contestants and emcee and a couple of other people—including one pilot who's “dead-heading it” on a *charter flight* to pick up his next flight—are in the plane, it takes off, and the cleaners hijack it.

They're a little but incredibly crazed group who just want \$5 million and a ride to Nicaragua, and so far they've only killed one copilot. What they get, though, thanks to Feds who take over from the airport's security, is an attempt to wipe them completely off the face of the earth—contestants and other hostages included—because (ahem) the government was using a cheapo charter flight and one of the contestants to smuggle a cigar case (one cigar tube) full of incredibly deadly virus (that would kill all of Florida if it escaped) to a “friendly nation” that works on antidotes to such viruses. (OK, that's a spoiler, but it comes out very early in the movie and you can't really spoil a flick like this.) Anyway, the first attempt to bomb them all to oblivion fails because the radio messages aren't coming from the hideout (an abandoned base in the Florida Keys, I think) but from a boat...and the job of blasting them so thoroughly that the virus is completely destroyed is done so well that the government folks can and do rescue the hijacker who was in the boat, and who of course tells them where the hostages actually are.

Oh, never mind. We get forced beauty pageantry. We get various stupidity. We finally get a touch of heroism by flying a seaplane straight into the sea. And I say “there's 97 minutes I'll never get back.”

Awful awful awful. A waste of good talent. I could commend the scenery, but they managed to shoot it so cheaply that you don't see much scenery. If only for the talent, I'll give it \$0.50.

Mysteries, 1978, color. Paul de Lussanet (dir.), Rutger Hauer, Sylvia Kristel, David Rappaport, Rita Tushingham, Marina de Graaf. 1:28.

A stranger comes to town...

That's one of the classic beginnings for any plot, and I'm tempted to summarize this flick with the line above followed by:

...the stranger dies.

That's a little cryptic, but so is this movie. Technically, it's not *quite* the end of the plot, as the little person ("the midget," David Rappaport) who narrates much of it winds up defacing one of the two (or three) women who (apparently) drove the stranger to his end (somehow). The stranger is an agronomist: that much is clear, and it's the only clear thing about him.

For what it's worth, this is an (apparently faithful?) adaptation of a novel by the same name by Nobel laureate Knut Hamsun. So there's that. It's filmed entirely on the Isle of Man.

Sorry, but I really can't summarize this one. Either the print is flawed or the color is deliberately somewhat artistic and sometimes oversaturated. It's moody, it's odd, it's...well, it was good enough to keep me watching through the whole thing, so even though I end up no wiser or more satisfied than when I began, I'll give it \$1.00.

Corrupt (orig. *l'assassino dei poliziotti*, also *Copkiller* or *Order of Death*). 1983 (sleeve says 1977, IMDB says filmed in 1981), color. Roberto Faenza (dir.), Harvey Keitel, John Lydon, Leonard Mann, Nicole Garcia, Sylvia Sidney. Ennio Morricone (composer). 1:57 (1:33).

I see that the last post on a disc's worth of movies was in June 2014—and here it is January 2015. That's the power of OA investigation: I've only watched four movies in seven months instead of the usual one a week.

Or, actually, make that 3.3 movies—because I was unwilling to waste another hour on this piece of crap after struggling through the first half hour of perhaps the worst Morricone score I can ever imagine hearing ("highlighted" by an awful repeated "country" song set to a classic Tchaikovsky melody) and a plot that—if I could make sense of it—was just terrible people doing terrible things, partly while wearing badges.

I guess it's about a series of cop killings in New York, with the cops all on the drug squad (I guess?), with a detective who has two apartments and an apparent second identity (but no attempt at disguise—the sleeve says he's leading a double life as a drug dealer, but that doesn't show up in the first half hour), and a young lunatic (Lydon of the Sex Pistols,

in apparently—and deservedly—his only acting role) with an extreme British accent who claims to be American and says he’s the killer, which he apparently isn’t. Or is. I dunno. Perhaps all is revealed later in the movie. He gets locked up and tortured by this detective (Keitel).

And, well, I just couldn’t. I didn’t give a damn what happened to Keitel. I didn’t give a damn what happened to Lydon. I never wanted to hear that song again or more of Morricone’s “here’s a sting because this bit of film matters!” score. A cheapo Italian flick. No rating.

Disc 44

Power, Passion and Murder, 1983, color (TV—see below). Michelle Pfeiffer, Darren McGavin, Stella Stevens and a whole bunch of other people. 1:28.

The good parts: interesting cast members, and I believe they get the look and feel of ‘30s Hollywood down pretty well...although that was even before my time.

The bad parts: Where to begin? The plot—or, rather, the two plots that seem to come and go with no real interaction—seem(s) contrived and more vignette than anything else. One plot boils down to: studio head has a bad evening. The other boils down to: single actress seduces married man, leading rapidly to disaster. In neither case is there enough development (character or otherwise) for me to feel anything about it. The picture varies from soft and damaged to mediocre. The sound is far worse—with volume levels and distortion varying so widely that I probably missed a significant chunk of the dialogue.

Cast or no cast, this is a mess. Trying to find it in IMDB makes things even messier: it is, apparently, two separate episodes of PBS’ Great Performances mashed together into a single, well, mash. Or is it two episodes of something else? If I try to reconstruct it, there’s “Tales from the Hollywood Hills: Natica Jackson” from 1987 (or was it 1983?), with Pfeiffer and a bunch of other people—but I don’t remember seeing most of the people in the cast listing actually in the segments starring Pfeiffer. There’s also “A Table at Ciro’s” with McGavin, Stevens and others—I guess from 1983. Apparently the mess is supposed to be 16 minutes longer. It would still be a mess. Charitably, \$0.50.

Midnight Cop (orig. *Killing Blue*), 1988, color. Peter Patzak (dir.), Armin Mueller-Stahl, Morgan Fairchild, Frank Stallone, Michael York. 1:36.

This nourish cop flick set in Berlin is a little strange at times (the police station seems to be going through extreme renovations that involve lots of broken toilets), but it’s also surprisingly effective and tags an ending onto the main plot that’s a nice, satisfying twist.

Basically, a police inspector is having trouble sleeping, lost his wife and daughter, and is pretty much messed up because he accidentally shot a young girl while trying to arrest a major criminal (who got away). He

frequently takes gifts to the place where the now-crippled girl is recovering but (until late in the film) isn't prepared to meet her. Meanwhile, he has a new assistant—and is dealing with a DA (who's a friend) as well. The colleague's daughter's friend is murdered in an odd manner; they both become involved; a drug dealer seems to be the obvious suspect; a prostitute also becomes involved with the inspector and in the plot; and all is not quite what it seems.

I liked it. Morgan Fairchild makes a great prostitute; Michael York is very effective in a complicated role; Armin Mueller-Stahl, the inspector, is first-rate; the whole cast is good. Pretty good print, no real problems. I'll give it \$1.50.

The Stoolie, 1972, color. John G. Avidsen & George Silano (dirs.), Jackie Mason, Dan Frazer, Marcia Jean Kurtz. 1:30 [1:28]

This feels like a Jackie Mason vanity project (he's the star and the executive producer) to show his chops as a dramatic actor. If so, I'd rate it a D: he certainly maintains a cheap-grifter persona throughout, but that's about it. He plays a bozo, a low-rent criminal (who's such a loser that his "partners" in crime screw him out of his share as a matter of course) who's also a stoolie for one police detective in Weehawken. He ups his game enough to convince the detective to give him \$7,500 in police money to set up a sting (or something)—and takes off for Miami with the money.

There, after demonstrating to various & sundry what a bozo he is, he meets up with a young woman who's as down on life as he seems to be, and *shazam*, they're in love and engaged...but the detective nearing retirement, who faces being thrown off the force for throwing away \$7,500, has tracked him down. The rest of the movie is attempts by the cop and the grifter, with the girl along for the ride, to raise the \$7,500 (he'd already spent all but a few hundred)—which the cop finally manages to do, turning thoroughly bad in the process. He drives off with his money (upped to \$10,000) and two bags of heroin taped to the car, one of which is leaking. The couple is left in Miami, where their future...well, it's a low-rent movie. A dispiriting movie at that. Charitably, \$0.75.

Cross Mission (orig. *Fuoco incrociato*), 1988, color. Alfonso Brescia (dir.), Richard Randall, Brigitte Porsche, Peter Hintz, Maurice Poli. 1:31.

The plot: a military dictator has run a Latin American country for two decades. He oversees an operation to burn down one cocaine/marijuana plantation at the UN's behest—so that he can run three other, larger plantations with better camouflage and without interference. Oh, and there are rebels, which his spokesman denies. Also, the dictator has certain magical powers that involve a little person.

There's an American woman, a photographer/journalist, and an American man, apparently a buddy of the dictator. Of course they wind up

in bed. Of course the man turns rebel. Most of the movie is shooting and explosions. About the only surprise (spoiler alert): the woman winds up dead.

Truly trashy. If you're a big fan of gunfire and explosions in the Spaghetti Western mode (the flick's Italian), maybe \$0.50.

Disc 45

The Manipulator, 1971, color. Yabo Yablonsky (dir & screenplay), Mickey Rooney, Luana Anders, Keenan Wynn. 1:25 [1:31]

No. No no no. It's been almost six months since I watched one of these, and more like this could make me give up entirely. The plot, to the extent that I saw it: Mickey Rooney as a crazed old Hollywood person who carries on all parts of a movie-making set of conversations as he bumps into things in an old prop warehouse...but he's got an actress tied up as well (kidnapped and being slowly starved), and I guess that their interactions are the heart of the movie. After 20 minutes, I just couldn't—and wish I'd given up after ten.

I didn't see Keenan Wynn during the chunk I watched. Looking at the IMDB reviews, I see one that values it as an experimental film and, well, I guess you can make the worst shit look like roses if you try hard enough. Another praises it for Rooney's "extraordinarily uninhibited performance," but several say things like "endurance test for the viewer" and "nearly unwatchable." I'm with them: not only no redeeming value, but really nasty. No rating.

Death in the Shadows (orig. *De prooi*), 1985, color. Vivian Peters (dir.), Maayke Bouten, Erik de Vries, Johan Leysen, Marlous Fluitsma. 1:37.

This one's pretty good—with plenty of mystery, although the metamystery's easy enough to resolve. (The metamystery: why is a 1985 color film available in a Mill Creek Entertainment set? The answer: it's from the Netherlands, has no stars known in America, and wouldn't have done well as a U.S. release.)

In brief: an almost-18-year-old young woman finds that her mother was killed—and that her mother didn't have any children. The young woman now lives alone (and her boyfriend/lover is leaving for a big vacation as it's the end of the school year), and—sometimes working with a police detective, sometimes ignoring his advice—wants to know what happened. In the process, she almost gets run down (which is what happened to her mother), her mother's brother gets murdered, and she avoids death. We find out what happened.

Moody, frequently dark, fairly well done. Maayke Bouten is quite effective as the young woman, Valerie Jaspers, but this is apparently her only actual film credit (she was 21 at the time, so 18 isn't much of a stretch: she also did one TV movie and appeared as herself on a TV

show). Not fast-moving and no flashy special effects, but a pretty good film. \$1.50.

Born to Win, 1971, color. Ivan Passer (dir.), George Segal, Paula Prentiss, Karen Black, Jay Fletcher, Hector Elizondo, Robert De Niro. 1:28 [1:24]

The disc sleeve identifies Robert De Niro as the star here, but this is very much a George Segal flick, with Karen Black and others—although De Niro’s in it (for some reason feeling to me like Billy Crystal playing Robert De Niro). The movie’s about a junkie (Segal) and...well, it’s about an hour and 24 minutes long.

Beyond that: poor editing, worse scriptwriting, continuity that deserves a “dis” in front of it. I got a hint in the first five minutes that this was going to have what you might call an “experimental” narrative arc, and so it was. Pretty dreary, all in all. Yes, it’s a low-budget indie with a great cast, but... (I will say: most IMDB reviews seem very positive. Good for them.) Charitably, for George Segal or Karen Black fans, maybe \$0.75.

A Killing Affair, 1986, color. David Saperstein (dir.), Peter Weller, Kathy Baker, John Glover. 1:40.

A juicy chunk of Southern Gothic—set in West Virginia in 1943, starring Kathy Baker as the wife (or, really, property) of a mill foreman who’s ripping off the employees, openly sleeping with other women, and generally a piece of work. A stranger comes to...well, not so much town as the house across the lake from town where Baker lives (with her children on weekends—during the week, they stay in town with her brother, the preacher who clearly believes that women are to Obey Their Husbands).

Ah, but shortly before the stranger (Peter Weller) shows up, she discovers that her rotten husband is now hanging in the shed, very much dead. She makes some efforts to get help but isn’t quite willing to walk two miles to town (the boat’s gone), so... Anyway, the stranger shows up and Plot happens. Part of it: he admits to killing her husband, but claims her husband killed his wife and children and was about to shoot him. There are all sorts of family secrets involved in her past. A pack of wild dogs also plays a role throughout the flick, especially in the climax.

Languid most of the time, with an unsurprising ending. Not terrible, not great. Weller’s a pretty convincing mentally unstable (but smooth!) killer, and Baker’s pretty much always good, and certainly is here. I’ll give it \$1.25.

Disc 46

Murder Once Removed, 1971 (TV movie), color. Charles Dubin (dir.), John Forsythe, Richard Kiley, Reta Shaw, Joseph Campanella, Barbara Bain, Wendell Burton. 1:14.

A junkie vet (Burton) who's trying to kick the stuff and go to college; a doctor (Forsythe) who's helping out—and who's got the hots for the wife (Bain) of a local businessman (Kiley); a police detective (Campanella, of course). Those are the key players—well, those and the doctor's nurse (Shaw) and the nurse's dog (uncredited), who howls whenever there's been a death.

See, the wife and the doctor are seeing each other—innocently, so far, but the doctor wants to change that—and the businessman has looked into the doctor's past in another town, where his mother-in-law died of a heart attack and, not too much later, his wife also died of a heart attack, leaving him the money to come home and buy out his father's medical practice. The businessman—a patient of the doctor, as are the other characters—believes the doctor did it *and tells him so*, thinking he's taken precautions to assure that the same fate doesn't befall him.

That's the setup. The rest involves the doctor murdering the businessman (*not* by inducing a heart attack), his careful framing of the young vet, the detective being suspicious of it all being too pat...and a little stage acting that results in the doctor confessing all.

Except...well, there are two more twists in the last five minutes of the flick (which has all the characteristics of a TV movie). I won't give them away, but will note that one of them makes an earlier scene seem *entirely* phony and implausible. Incidentally, the plot summary on IMDb is wrong: the wife did *not* plot the murder with the doctor. At least not directly...

When I write the review, I don't know whether it's a TV movie, but can't explain this one any other way. Good cast, decent movie. \$1.25.

Hollywood Man, 1976, color. Jack Starrett (dir.), William Smith Jennifer Billingsley, Ray Girardin, Jude Farese. 1:37 [1:24]

This seems to be a no-budget movie about making a no-budget biker movie and the perils of getting most of your absurdly inadequate financing from someone you know is out to screw you, and who can claim all of your assets if the flick doesn't get made rapidly. (Really: the obviously-connected "financier" turns them down, hands them another guy's card and says "If I was you, I wouldn't call him." Sounds like a sure winner to me! On the other hand, that was the dramatic highlight of the portion of the film I watched.) It was written by four of the "stars" with assistance from the cast and crew; it was produced by two of the "stars." (OK, maybe William Smith really was a star at some point, famous for *Grave of the Vampire* and *Nam's Angels*, two other flicks I'll probably never see.) It seems to be mostly a bunch of badly-filmed stunts done by people who don't much give a damn.

Within ten minutes, I realized that I couldn't tell which group of mumbling lowlife asshats were the good guys and which group were the bad guys and that I didn't care one way or the other. Within 20 minutes, I

recognized that this was one of those just plain incompetent movies, not one that's so incompetent—but with such good intentions—that it's amusing (e.g., *Plan 9 from Outer Space*).

Apparently, the stupidity escalates to beatings, murders and rapes further in the movie; I didn't encounter that (well, maybe one murder: it was hard to tell, frankly) because the movie was such crap that I didn't get that far. Maybe it's because I'm now officially Old (at 70): With only 25-30 years to go, life really is too short for this garbage.

I never look at IMDB reviews until I've written mine—but this “review,” from Ray Girardin, may say all that needs to be said about the flick:

Hi, I'm Ray Girardin. I wrote “Stoker” (which became “Hollywood Man”) along with my friend Bill Smith in 1976. We wrote it mainly so we could do a movie together, and it worked out. He played the lead, Rafe Stoker, and I played the heavy, Harvey. There were problems along the way, as there always are with low-budget films, but we enjoyed doing it. If you've seen it, I'd welcome your comments, pro or con.

I stopped watching about 20 minutes in, and have no plans to resume. If you're so inclined, you can apparently watch it for free on Youtube or download it from the Internet Archive. As the first financier might say, “If you're smart, you won't.” \$0.

Dominique, 1979, color. Michael Anderson (dir.), Cliff Robertson, Jean Simmons, Jenny Agutter, Simon Ward. 1:40 (1:35)

The wealthy (but nervous) wife of a stockbroker (who seems to need money, although they live in a mansion with several staff members) witnesses some odd incidents—she's apparently being gaslighted by her husband. Eventually, she commits suicide—but then her husband starts having incidents that lead him to believe that her ghost has returned. An oddly substantial ghost, capable of paying for a dual headstone (with his side having “soon” as the death date), playing piano and more.

Lots of odd incidents, eventually involving the murder of the family doctor (who certified the wife as being dead) and the semi-accidental death of the husband. Both wills are read at the same time, and other than minor bequests, her money all goes to the chauffeur and his all goes to the half-sister, despite his business partner's assurance that most would go to the business.

The reveal, such as it is, is mostly annoying, especially as it winds up badly for everybody (and leaves a number of key plot points unresolved). Perhaps the missing five minutes would have helped.

Slow-moving, plodding at times, not terrible but certainly not great. Good cast; odd that it's in this set, although it was apparently never released in the U.S. Maybe \$1.25.

Julie Darling, 1983, color. Paul Nicholas (dir & screenplay), Anthony Franciosa, Sybil Danning, Isabelle Mejias, Paul Hubbard, Cindy Girling. 1:40 [1:30]

Julie just wants to be with her father. Not so much her mother, and she finds a way to take care of that, thanks to a delivery boy who finds the mother hot enough to turn him into a rapist and, more or less accidentally, killer.

Ah, but the father's been seeing somebody else, a young widow, and soon enough...well, Julie fails to kill off the widow's son, but is determined to do in the woman who's now her stepmother. I won't go through the whole plot, except to note that some stepmothers ought not to be messed with (and the last thing you want to be is Julie's girlfriend from school!).

A tawdry little movie (badly panned-and-scanned) that earns its R with nudity, both gratuitous and not quite so gratuitous, plus of course violence. The missing ten minutes might help but wouldn't make it less tawdry. After watching this, I really felt the need for a shower—but lovers of tawdry noir might give it \$0.75.

Disc 47

The Swap (orig. *Sam's Song*), 1969, color. Jordan Leondopoulos (dir.), Robert De Niro, Jarred Mickey, Jennifer Warren, Sybil Danning, Terrayne Crawford. 1:29 [1:21]

Guy gets out of prison, goes looking for his brother's murderer, gets warned off by a cop, keeps looking, finds out his brother was making pornos, keeps looking, eventually finds and shoots the killer...getting shot himself in the process.

Put that way, it doesn't sound that great...and the movie's nothing special. Maybe the missing eight minutes (which must have had the footage that got an R rating) made all the difference? A young (and, honestly, not very interesting) De Niro stars...or doesn't. Ah, looking at the IMDB listing and reviews makes it a bit more interesting: De Niro's the director, and what I saw is a 1979 thing that remakes his 1969 *Sam's Song* into a different movie. Still not compelling or very good. Charitably, for De Niro completists, \$0.75.

Night of the Sharks (orig. *La notte degli squali*), 1988, color. Tonino Ricci (dir.), Treat Williams, Janet Agren, Antonio Fargas. 1:27.

Let's see. I watched this on December 15, 2016. Apparently I watched the previous movie on April 2, 2016. At this rate, I'll be done with the remainder of this set and the other two megapacks on hand in...about 75 years. Guess I'll have to pick up the pace. One can only hope that most of the rest aren't quite as lame as this one is.

Plot? Such as it is: the brother of a laid-back diver had been bugging telephone calls between a crook and the President for years, and has cut a CD with the Greatest Hits. He wants a big payoff to return the disc. He then mails the original to his beach-bum brother (the flick was filmed in the Dominican Republic, so let's assume it's set there). From then on, we have occasional spurts of action and lots of underwater and above-water footage, all of it in the daytime, involving this really mean shark who really, really wants our hero. There's more, of course, but it's all pretty lame: poorly directed, not very well shot, badly "written." Oh: I suppose this is the R version, as there's about 15 seconds of topless women at a swimming pool who are totally unrelated to the plot. Hey, it's bad Italian cinema. *Very* charitably, \$0.75.

We Interrupt These Mini-Reviews for a Message

My wife asked a reasonable question, given that book reading, OA research, etc., etc. conspired to leave more than half a year between viewing movies that weren't any good: **Why?** Thinking about it...I'm raising my standards. If after fifteen or twenty minutes the flick doesn't seem likely to be at least at the \$1 level, I'll stop and do one of the "not viewed" write-ups. That should help. Now, back to the flicks.

Beyond Justice, color, 1992. Duccio Tessari (dir.), Rutger Hauer, Carol Alt, Omar Sharif, Elliott Gould. 1:53 [1:46]

A wealthy young businesswoman's son (sort of a rotten kid, kept in private school only through her frequent donations) is kidnapped by her ex-husband (his father), the son of a Moroccan Emir. There's some nonsense with silver boxes planted in both their houses—all of which leads up to *The Situation*: the Emir wants the grandson to become the next Emir (Omar Sharif), since his son is too Westernized or something.

Meanwhile...the mother (Carol Alt, with Elliott Gould as her lawyer, who also wants to marry her) hires a mercenary (Rutger Hauer) to find and rescue the son—and insists on accompanying them. After which we get lots of intrigue, lots of shooting, an enormous amount of Moroccan desert scenery, a feuding desert tribe that gets involved at the last minute—and an ending that leaves me wondering why the whole bloody mess was necessary in the first place, as the still-alive Emir gives his grandson the choice of how to proceed and he goes with his mother. (The father's kaput.) Oh, and the mother falls for the handsome mercenary.

Great cast (but Gould's completely wasted). Great scenery. Ennio Morricone score. Bizarre and ultimately pointless plot. There must have been dialogue and direction, but.... I watched the last half of it double-speed, which kept it moving. Not a great movie by a long shot, but possibly worth \$1.

Cold Blood (orig. *Das Amulett des Todes*), color, 1975. Günter Vaessen (dir), Rutger Hauer, Vera Tschechowa, Horst Frank. 1:20 [says 1:30 on sleeve, actual runtime 1:14]

The original title makes a *little* more sense, but not a lot. The “plot”? A young woman has gone off to a country house—where she has the key oh-so-cleverly hidden by leaving it on the sill over the door, because nobody would *ever* think to look there. Anyway, she takes a shower, hears shots, and sees that three men have been chasing another man who’s headed for her house...and shoot him, while seeing her.

So they’re going to take her with them so she won’t call the police and can bind up the guy’s wounds. Of course, she drives her car with The Boss of the little gang and the guy who’s been shot (Hauer). Of course, The Boss either falls asleep or has been stabbed and she easily eludes the other car, gets the guy worked on by a doctor, and goes with him to a semi-deserted country estate...where, equally of course, she jumps into bed with him (after a display of nudity which pleases one of the gang watching with binoculars—because, *of course*, they’ve found where she’s driven to and she disrobes in front of an open window).

What can I say? The explicit sex scene is the most complicated acting in the flick and makes no more sense than anything else. *Of course* she’d jump in bed with a guy she’s never met but who’s endangered her life and is probably a criminal because...well, Rutger Hauer, I guess. \$0.50 if you’re a Hauer or Tschechowa fan, \$0.25 otherwise.

Disc 48

With four movies to a disc, how does Mill Creek get 50 movies on 12 discs—or, in this case, 250 on 60? By having the occasional disc with more, usually shorter, movies. Like this one, with six relatively short mysteries.

Rogue’s Gallery, 1944, b&w. Albert Herman (dir.), Robin Raymond, Frank Jenks, H.B. Warner, Ray Walker, Bob Homans. 1:00 [0:58]

The title makes no sense at all, but this is a wacky little story of the wisecracking woman reporter (the smartest person in the flick) and her slightly dim photographer sidekick as they encounter a wonderful (and wonderfully dangerous) invention and a couple of murders.

The plot moves quickly and maybe isn’t worth recounting. (The invention allows you to listen to anybody, *anywhere*, if you know the “unique frequency” their location has. It has one very prominent vacuum tube. Hey, it was 1944.) There’s also a corpse that keeps getting moved and a couple of car chases. That the cameraman had the bad guy’s picture all along and didn’t realize it may not be too important, since all the action seems to take place in one night. Fast-moving and pretty enjoy-

able. That Frank Jenks (the sidekick) gets first billing over Robin Raymond is typical Hollywood sexism: she's the star player. Given its length, I'll say \$1.25.

The Black Raven, 1943, b&w. Sam Newfield (dir.), George Zucco, Wanda McKay, Noel Madison, Robert Livingston, Glenn Strange, Byron Foulger. 1:01 [0:59]

It was a dark and stormy night...

That's the weather and the mood of this movie, which is so dark that the action's invisible much of the time (the print doesn't help). The action takes place in *The Black Raven*, a hotel near the Canadian border whose host (Amos Bradford, also known as the Black Raven) makes a few extra bucks by smuggling criminals across the border—and probably through other means. As the picture begins, his old partner in crime (busted out of prison with ten years left to serve) shows up and, in the usual manner of *Movie Bad Guys With Scores To Settle*, stands there talking at him instead of using that gun—so that when his tall, oafish assistant Andy, the comic relief of the movie, walks in, Bradford can wrestle the gun away and tie the guy up in his office. He gets out at some point.

I'm probably missing some of the plot, but basically the bridge across the border is washed out, as are other ways across, so the guy turning people back directs them to the *Black Raven*. Thus, in addition to a wanted criminal mastermind awaiting the cross-border smuggle, we have a bank clerk who's embezzled \$50,000; a young couple planning to get married in Canada because her father, a crooked politician, opposes the marriage; the father in question; and eventually a sheriff. (I may have missed someone.) The politician winds up dead; the bumbling sheriff immediately *assumes* that the young man must have done it; and, as time goes on, we get [I think] three more deaths.

Between the dark print and the muddled plot, I can't see much to recommend this. Charitably, \$0.50.

Seven Doors to Death, 1944, b&w. Elmer Clifton (dir.), Chick Chandler, June Clyde, George Meeker. 1:04 [1:00]

While this flick also suffers from goings-on-in-the-dark print problems, the main problem is that it's 100 minutes of plot in a 60-minute film. It starts out with a sequence that never quite makes sense, and I'm not sure I ever did figure out the full cast of characters and who did what to whom when why...

The title's easy enough. Most of the film takes place in an odd community of seven shops (and apartments for the shopkeepers?) arranged around a courtyard. There's a photographer, a milliner (the heroine, who also may or may not be heir to the whole operation), a furrier/taxidermist (primary villain) and...well, others. There's a jewelry heist,

two murders, a disappearing corpse, and an interesting gimmick. Oh, and the wisecracking...architect, apparently, with a jalopy named Genevieve. He winds up with the beautiful milliner. Cops are also involved. There's even a dance number.

It's not terrible, but it's not all that great either. Maybe \$0.75.

Five Minutes to Live, 1961, b&w. Bill Karn (dir.), Johnny Cash, Donald Woods, Cay Forester, Vic Tayback, Ron (Ronnie) Howard, Merle Travis. 1:20 [1:14]

An unusual cast and an improbable bank-robbery plot, adding up to an OK movie. The cast features Johnny Cash as a gun-happy thief with a sadistic streak (he's only too happy to shoot his girlfriend, but he'd rather not shoot kids) and Ronnie Howard (later Ron, but this is at Opie age), along with Vic Tayback as the hardbitten criminal mastermind whose plot really doesn't work out very well. (At least he's alive at the end, albeit in the hands of the cops: Cash doesn't fare as well.) Merle Travis has a brief role as a bowling alley owner (and plays a guitar solo on the theme song and guitar through much of the soundtrack).

A lot hangs on a banker who was about ready to run off with his girlfriend and divorce his wife, but in the end turns out to love his wife after all. Maybe. I'd spell out the rest of the plot, but why bother? (The title, which is also a Johnny Cash song over the titles, alludes to a key plot point: if Cash, holding a gun on the wife, doesn't get called every five minutes she gets it—except that it doesn't quite work out that way.) Clearly a low-budget flick, so-so print, but some interesting acting (esp. Cay Forester, the wife and hostage, a little over the top—and why not, since she also wrote the screenplay?). All in all, not memorable, but not bad. \$1.25.

Lady Gangster, 1942, b&w. Robert Florey (dir.), Faye Emerson, Julie Bishop, Frank Wilcox. 1:02.

The basic plot is that a would-be actress, in the same rooming house as three would-be bank robbers, facilitates the robbery...and is sent to prison. She's also an old friend of a sort-of crusading radio station owner. After lots of scenes in a women's prison (which seems to let inmates wear the clothes they arrived with), she escapes to help apprehend the others (although she'd actually hidden the \$40K loot anyway). Somehow, despite multiple killings and her unquestionable involvement, it has a Cute Ending with Probable Nuptials. Apparently, a young Jackie Gleason was one of the robbers.

Even charitably, and mostly for Faye Emerson fans, make it \$0.75.

The Sphinx, 1933, b&w. Phil Rosen (dir.), Lionel Atwill, Sheila Terry, Theodore Newton, Paul Hurst. 1:04 [1:02]

This time, it's a wisecracking *male* reporter—with a society/features writer girlfriend who he wants to marry. He works the crime beat, and the crime's a stockbroker strangled in his office, as were three other stockbrokers previously. There's a witness of sorts, a janitor who sees a guy come out of the office, ask him for a light and ask him the time.

The murderer, obviously—except that he's a deaf-mute, as tests by both defendant's and state's doctors attest. The woman thinks he's also a Great Man, a benefactor to charities, and starts going to his mansion to interview him (sometimes with the help of an assistant/interpreter, sometimes with the use of a notepad).

I won't go through the rest of the plot, but it has to do with identical twins and secret chambers and piano playing. Oh, and the old suicide-through-poison-ring bit.

A bit low on plausibility—the killer's excuse is that the other stockbrokers disagreed with him on a deal, but he's been doing the deaf/dumb routine for years and obviously expected to be caught eventually (otherwise why the poison ring?). Still, not bad. \$1.00.

Wrapping Up the Eighth Segment

Only 50 more movies to go in this massive, mixed collection. What do I find for this subset? Nothing great or even very good. Two pretty good, enough to rate \$1.50: *Midnight Cop* and *Death in the Shadows*. Six more “good enough” at \$1.25 and three mediocre at \$1. That's 11 out of 25 that are at least mediocre, worth \$13.50. Add in the six somewhat-less-than-mediocre \$0.75, the four not-terrible \$0.50, and the single barely-tolerable \$0.25 and you can get \$19.50—along with three total losers.

It's been a little over *three years* since I discussed Part 7. It shouldn't be nearly that long for Part 9, but who knows?

The 250-movie pack has been out of print for a while; after all, as Amazon's infinite memory tells me, I purchased it *nine years* ago, in August 2008, paying \$59.96—one heck of a bargain. (Mill Creek Entertainment got out of the 250-movie business, although they still do a bunch of 50-movie packs, one 100-movie pack—and, especially through Stephen J. Cannell's arrangements, a *huge* amount of TV—107 complete series and lots of other stuff.)

You *can* still buy the set through Amazon, at least as of this writing (July 12, 2017), but from third parties. I see used prices starting at \$46, and if you want a new copy, that's a mere \$395. (Add \$3.99 shipping in each case.) Of course, those prices and availability may be different when you read this. Many of these flicks (possibly most or all) can also be viewed on the Internet Archive. And I suspect you could assemble this collection from five 50-movie packs, although I haven't tried.

The Back

While I'm not posting a "Going Out of Business" sign yet (or soon), I *do* want to catch up—if not with THE BACK-tagged items (41 at this writing), then at least with the backlog of print audio magazine stuff. So there will be much more audiofoolishness than usual this time around. If that bores you, read the next item and skip the rest.

International Journal of Stuff

To the best of my knowledge, there's no such journal—but there are a good many journals and "journals" that seem to have no definite field narrower than, say, "research" or "science" (of course, that's also true of *Science* itself).

Just for fun, I thought I'd look at just how many gold OA "International Journal of..." there are, and how many struck me as having no defined area. This is in THE BACK because it's pure silliness, not to be taken seriously.

Among the various journal spreadsheets I have—those for DOAJ, journals dropped from DOAJ, and journals (and "journals") on the notorious blacklists—I found 3,845 journal titles beginning "International Journal of" (that's after getting rid of extraneous characters and deduping). Going through that list and deduping further yielded 3,811—and that may be a little high or a little low.

I regarded "Science" as too general a term to mean anything but allowed "Engineering" and "Technology" as semi-meaningful. Whether rightly or wrongly, I didn't regard "interdisciplinary" or "multidisciplinary" as meaningful in the absence of something else.

That yields 85 titles—which is, frankly, *fewer* than I expected. Of these, nine are in DOAJ, 43 are *active* blacklisted titles, 20 are "titles" and 14 are either journals removed from DOAJ or in some other category.

Here's the list, with "International Journal of " removed and semicolons separating the titles. The list is in alphabetic order.

Academic Research; Academic Research and Development; Academic Research and Reflection; Academic Studies; Advance & Innovative Research; Advance Innovations, Thoughts & Ideas; Advance Innovations, Thoughts & Ideas Open Access; Advanced Academic Research; Advanced Analysis; Advanced and Applied Sciences; Advanced and Innovative Research; Advanced Multidisciplinary Research; Advanced Multidisciplinary Research and Review; Advanced Research; Advanced Research and Development; Advanced Science and Research; Advanced Scientific Research; Advanced Scientific Research and Essays; Advances in Scientific Research; Advances in Scientific Research and Reviews; Analysis; Analysis and Ap-

lications; Applied Research; Applied Research & Studies; Applied Science.; Applied Science-Research and Review; Applied Sciences; Basic and Applied Science; Basic and Applied Sciences; Basics and Applied Science; Collaborative Contributions; Cooperative Studies; Current Advanced Research; Current Innovation Research; Current Research; Current Research and Academic Review; Current Research and Review; Current Science; Current Science Research; Emerging Trends in Research; Frontiers in Science; Fundamental & Applied Sciences; Fundamental and Applied Sciences; Innovation; Innovation and Applied Studies; Innovation Research; Innovation Science and Research; Innovative and Applied Research; Innovative Concepts in Research; Innovative Ideas; Innovative Interdisciplinary Research; Innovative Research and Development; Innovative Research and Review; Innovative Research and Studies; Interdisciplinary and Multidisciplinary Studies; Interdisciplinary Research And Innovations; Multidisciplinary Academic Research; Multidisciplinary and Current Research; Multidisciplinary Research and Development; Multidisciplinary Research and Information; Multidisciplinary Research And Review; Open Scientific Research; Recent Advances in Multidisciplinary Research; Recent Research and Applied Studies; Recent Scientific Research; Research; Research and Applications; Research and Current Development; Research and Review; Research and Science Review; Research Development; Research in Sciences; Research Science and Management; Scholarly Research Gate; Science and Research; Sciences; Sciences : Basic and Applied Research; Scientific Progress & Research; Scientific Reports; Scientific Research; Scientific Research and Essays; Scientific Research and Innovative Technology; Scientific Study; Scientific World; Theoretical and Applied Sciences.

You say some of those are perfectly reasonable journal titles? You may be right. At least they're not too narrow...

Audio Oddities: July 2016

Smaller items from the wonderful world of high-end audio and home theater, as represented in the pages of *Stereophile* (high-end audio) and *Sound & Vision* (more mass-market audio, TV and home theater). I notice that the stack of source material goes back to July 2016, so some catching up is long overdue.

Listening to Records is So 20th-Century

Paul Messenger's "UK: Your Local Vinyl Shop" in *Stereophile*'s July 2016 "Industry Update" section discusses the curious resurgence of vinyl (LPs), which is happening in the UK as well as the US. There (the UK), 2015 sales were up 60% from 2015—which is still only 2.1 million "units" or about 2% of overall music sales, but it is 10 times the level of 2007. (In the US, 2015 sales were up 30%, to 12 million units.)

But that's not what gets a mention here. It's this: "Other relevant observations include the facts that a substantial portion of LPs are by people who don't have a turntable to play them on..." ("facts" plural because Amazon is apparently selling a lot of cheap turntables with built-in USB input).

I can get buying LPs because you're convinced vinyl sounds better; whether that's euphonic distortion or something else, it's a rational choice. But if you *don't have a turntable*, what's up? Buying as an investment because LPs are so rare? Guess what: they won't be rare for very long—especially now that Sony's getting back into the record-pressing business.

Maybe it's for the album art...

We are not crazy...

Speaking of vinyl, Michael Fremer's column in the same issue involves in part a brief review of a \$13,000 (OK, \$12,995) phono cartridge, which sounds just about right given that Fremer's system appears to be in the half-megabuck range or higher. (Who knew audio reviewing paid so well?) As is frequently the case, he feels the need to not only defend the prices of his phono equipment but also to denounce anybody who does *not* agree that vinyl is superior to digital. This time, his mild comment is "They think we're fetishizing a technology that's not worth salvaging, but that's only because they're 100% clueless."

The kicker is this, after quoting part of an email from a Swedish reader who's discovered the wonder of vinyl (using a reasonably cost-effective turntable):

We are *not* crazy, and it's not crazy to spend \$13,000 on a phono cartridge if you have a big record collection, a system that can do justice to such a sophisticated transducer, and an equally ample bank account (though I know some less-than-well-off record fanatics who do what they have to to own such extravagances).

Remember that Fremer's writing in a magazine that deals with the high end and has any number of vinyl fans. Why does he feel the need to keep telling us that "we are *not* crazy" over and over again? Is he trying to convince himself?

That parenthetical clause might be interesting to pursue in its implications (bank robbery? fraud? wiping out your kids' college funds or your own 401(k)?), but never mind. If you're actually not well off financially, *consider* a \$13,000 cartridge to be an "extravagance" (Fremer's word, not mine), and yet go out of your way to own it anyway, that's your business.

If you're in that July 2016 issue, you might look at Brian Damkroger's group review of several Nordost Valhalla Reference interconnects and cables: the speaker cable sells for a cool \$14,849.99 (not \$14,850, to be sure!) for a 3meter pair. Oh, and after lots of listening he concluded that they made music "a bit *too* gorgeous." Well, hey, they're not even \$15,000.

How expensive would a decent CPU be?

Same issue (July 2016), this time Kalman Rubinson's "Music in the Round" column (which deals entirely with digital, since it's about surround sound and SQ, QS and CD4 all bit the dust long ago), reviewing a \$3,500 music server. Which comes with 32GB of (SSD) storage, so you'll need external data storage. Oh, and it has an Intel Atom N2800 CPU (running at 1.86GHz).

That's a problem, as the review makes clear. Try to browse for the next song while you're listening to one, and playback may stutter.

The thing is, the Atom is a *very* low-end CPU—basically designed for tablets and smartphones. The server here is really just a PC with some special connections and software (running Windows Server). And it costs \$3,500 (or \$5,000 as reviewed). Seems like moving to, say, an i3 (the bottom end of Intel's Core series; that's what I have in my cheapo notebook), shouldn't add more than \$50 or \$100 and would make the device much more usable. But, of course, I'm not a high-end Korean manufacturer.

Audio Oddities: August 2016

Moving forward a month...

As little as possible

That's the key sentence in a surprising front-of-magazine "As We See It" in the August 2016 *Stereophile*—because it's Robert Schryer's response to the question "How much should I spend on an audiophile rig?" (He says he gets this question from non-audiophiles looking to make fun of the answer, and sometimes tosses out \$80,000 to see how they respond.)

The key word is "possible"—and he's talking about getting into your Happy Zone, "the Tao inside us...the unique balance of yin and yang...where we feel most assured, content, and satisfied, lacking in nothing." Or the sweet spot, if you will—which is different for each of us. After discussing this a bit more, he concludes by adding to the first four words: "provided it's enough to send you into your Happy Zone."

Sounds about right, but it's clear that some audiophiles are only happy with dissatisfaction: they'll never spend enough to reach their Happy Zone.

Stepping away from the CD

It's always odd when vinyl extremist Michael Fremer reviews a digital component—although at least in this case it's a Fremer-priced box: Moon by Simaudio Evolution 780D, a digital/analog processor that sells for a cool \$15,000. (What? It's not \$14,999.95? How refreshing.)

To play CDs through this pricey little box you'd need to add a CD transport—but Fremer suggests instead that you "rip your CDs" to a digital music server. How do you rip your CDs without a CD transport? Presumably with the cheapo DVD/CD drive built into your computer.

He includes stuff about how boring CDs are, how they lack the *entertainment* of “watching a stylus course through the grooves on an LP” (*I am not making this up!*), how you should treat your CDs with “Essence of Music” to make them sound better for the rip [as high-end tweaks go, it’s not bad: \$150 buys enough for 300 CDs, although I have no way of knowing whether it does anything useful], how adding an \$8,000 power supply might make this converter sound *even better*. (You can get a pretty good DAC for \$90-\$200, but hey, \$23,000 is a mere pittance for True High-End Equipment.)

Oh: it takes a long time for this *fully digital computer* to “break in,” which I buy with transducers (speakers and cartridges) but which strikes me as, well, odd for solid-state equipment,

Does it make a CD sound as good as Fremer’s beloved LPs? *Of course not*. That’s not really possible, as Fremer makes clear: no digital music can ever be “good enough for me to sit down and pay full attention.” Sad.

Cheaper!

Same issue, this time a Fred Kaplan review of the VTL TL6.5 Series II Line Preamplifier. Long-time readers know what a Line Preamp is: it’s a preamp that doesn’t preamplify—that doesn’t accept a phono cartridge. In other words, it’s an input switcher and volume control. (Sometimes also a tone control, but Real Purist High-End Equipment usually doesn’t include treble or bass controls.)

I’m not suggesting this isn’t a fine preamp; it apparently is. It also uses tubes, which in some circles automatically gains points (and also means that this volume control/switcher uses 150 watts of power). The headline brings in the great part of the review: this is a “cheaper, single-box preamp” cut down from VTL’s TL7.5 III.

Cheaper, in this case, means \$15,000. (Another blunt manufacturer!) How much is the TL7.5 III? \$20,000.

Unassailably true

I’m not spending much time on this Art Dudley review of a \$6,000 Sony SS-NA5ES stand-mount loudspeaker—little speakers, around 14” x 8” x 13” (HWD). It’s probably a neat little speaker (at a not-so-little price, especially since you need a subwoofer to get much below 55Hz). Nope, I’m interested in this Dudleyism, one of those things that makes me scratch my head when I read Art Dudley’s stuff:

...to paraphrase the 19th-century economist John Stuart Mill, while it is not true that all large speakers are dumb, it is unassailably true that most small speakers are smart.

Honest to Gaia, I read the paragraph that ends up with this “unassailable truth,” and I just don’t get it. That may be me...

The ultimate mancave?

The actual title for this four-page feature in the October 2016 *Sound & Vision* is “Game Day,” but that seems a bit tame for the “Sports Room” described and photographed here—with its *nine* TV screens, full-service bar, lots of manly seating, and a circular stairwell connecting the modest 32' x 32' room (with a beamed ceiling peaking at 25 feet) to the *lower* level area, with wine cellar, billiards room, spa, and the *real* home theater (featuring a 129”screen).

But what the heck, there are another 13 TVs scattered around this modest little New Jersey household, a starter-upper with a mere 22,000 square feet of living space on eleven acres.

How any of this is useful or inspirational for more than 1% of this magazine’s readers is beyond me, but then so is a 22,000 square foot house for a single family. No prices given: after all, if you have to ask, you’re not likely to build this.

Avoiding Doorstops?

I’m not sure whether this is a cautionary tale or not. The October 2016 *Sound & Vision* has a highly favorable review of the Kaleidescape Strato 4K Ultra HD Movie Player, a \$4,495 box that stores six terabytes worth of UHD (or lower-resolution) movies and has an “unrivaled user interface” to select them for streaming to TVs. (You can get 12TB and 24TB versions for \$1,000 or \$3,000 more.)

Six terabytes will store around 100 UHD movies. You can buy UHD movies for \$30 or so, to the extent that there are UHD movies you want, so figure another \$3,000 to have a hundred movies on hand, presuming that you want to watch those movies often enough.

Oh, but if you already *own* UHD movies on UHD Blu-ray, well...you might or might not be able to get it for less. That’s right: *get it*: there’s no disc drive, and the *only* way to get movies is to buy them through Kaleidescape itself. (And you thought Apple had closed systems...)

The glitch here is an editor’s note in the November 2016 issue: Kaleidescape was closing its doors. Fortunately, a new investor was found, but if it happens again, well...you better like those movies a *lot*, since you otherwise have a \$4,495 doorstop. (I’m assuming the server doesn’t actually require touching home base—Kaledescape—before a movie will play.)

Hey, the original Kaleidescape movie server cost \$30,000 (a decade ago), and got rave reviews...but at least that one could import DVDs.

A Hat-Tip to Arcam

This one’s a counter-snark. The November 2016 *Sound & Vision* includes a review of the Arcam AVR850 AV Receiver, an \$8,000 seven-channel

brute with a rated output of 120 watts per channel with two channels driven or 100 watts per channel with all seven channels driven.

Most receiver power ratings appear as “per channel” or *possibly* with the “two channels driven” proviso. When tested, most of them meet their two-channel ratings—and come nowhere near that rating with all channels driven, frequently not even reaching half the power.

Not the Arcam. When tested, its 0.1% THD power was 125.9 watts per channel with two channels driven—and 110.3 watts per channel with seven channels driven. At 1.0% THD (a looser limit useful when rating, for example, tube amps), it hit 121.2 watts per channel with seven channels driven (142.8 for two channels).

Admittedly, most movies and surround-sound recordings don't put nearly as much energy into side and rear channels as in the front, and most music barely requires more than a few watts at reasonable levels on most speakers. Still, it's refreshing to see a receiver that not only makes powerful claims for all-channel power, but actually *meets* (or exceeds) those claims.

Audio Oddities: December 2016

Let's begin with the *Sound & Vision* review of Yamaha's \$199 YAS-106 soundbar—which, this being *S&V*, gets the “Top Pick” award that seems to be on three of every four reviews. Never mind (this award is doubtless for being an unusually good under-\$200 soundbar with only one box and starting with the letter “Y”). Never mind that it has very little bass (not surprising, since there's no separate bass module): it's cheap.

What earns the item a mention is in the “Specs” section, enumerating the speakers: “2.125 in cone woofer (2), 1 in dome tweeter (2), 3 in cone subwoofer (2).” *Ain't no such thing as a 3" subwoofer*. This is a soundbar with two lower-midrange speakers they're calling “woofers” and two slightly larger upfiring (so don't put the soundbar directly under the TV!) “subwoofers.” From the graph, it looks as though there's *some* bass down to 60Hz, astonishing for such small speakers but certainly not “subwoofer” territory.

(There are three more short reviews of increasingly less-cheap soundbars--\$300, \$400 and \$500 respectively. Two of the three have separate “subwoofer” boxes with at least somewhat larger speakers; the fourth has larger built-in speakers that are *not* called subwoofers. All three go at least half an octave lower.)

3D Everywhere?

Remember when TV pundits were assuring us that our next set would be 3D, whether we wanted it or not? I surely do. But, well...

A *Sound & Vision* review of one of the first Ultra HD Blu-ray players (for 4K TV), the Philips BDP7501/F7, notes that—unlike an earlier Samsung UHD player—it *does* support 3D in Blu-ray. But not in UHD: “because that's not part of the UHD specs—there are no 3D UHD sources—

nor are there ever likely to be. While 3D is still hanging on in the commercial cinema market, it's dying a slow, painful death in home video." Or, given the headaches so many people get from 3D, maybe "slow, not so painful death."

Number of pundits I've seen admit that *they were wrong* in their Universal 3D assertions? Zero, as far as I can remember.

I know, I know: Punditry means never having to say you were wrong.

If you have to ask...

I know I've given *Condé Nast Traveler* a bad time (and an unrenewed subscription) for becoming the kind of aspirational magazine that never mentions prices because, well, if you have to ask...

Didn't expect that in stereo magazines, especially since some of them gleefully recommend \$200,000 turntables and speaker systems. And in this case I suppose it's not the magazine: the last-page "Premiere Design" feature in the December 2016 *Sound & Vision*, all about the Oswalds Mill AC1 Speaker, headlined "Contemporary Classic."

The reviewer thinks these seven-foot-tall speakers are classy. Speaker looks are always a matter of personal taste; they're not my style, [but see for yourself](#). The price is stated as "For pricing, fill out the Contact form..."

Another source says \$53,000, which isn't seen as absurd at the high end. Oswalds Mill says only 25 will be made—each one takes a month of handcrafting Pennsylvania hardwood, and they rely on very old drivers that are no longer available—but as of this writing, apparently there are still a few left. Maybe the rush is for Oswalds Mill's *high end* speakers, [which look even stranger](#) and go for a mere \$280,000. A pair, that is. I see that the Oswalds Mill site studiously avoids prices. Actually, as another article notes, the manufacturer *specifically* avoids mentioning prices—and says it doesn't want its equipment to be reviewed. But it sure seems to love having it written up in gee-whiz fashion! Oh, and the showroom is By Appointment Only. Remarkably, they do make a "low-end" speaker, a "mini" that apparently sells for a mere \$21,000. But they don't mention *that* price on their website either.)

Audio Oddities: January 2017

Did I mention that Oswalds Mill speakers were distinctive in looks ("distinctive" is nicely ambiguous)? The January 2017 *Stereophile* offers a highly favorable review of the Bang & Olufsen [BeoLab 90 speakers](#)—and the link is to the manufacturer's site, because *Stereophile's* online review only shows the speaker with its grilles in place, and with grilles it's got an interesting look that's not *too* unusual.

But the first photo in the print version of the review is, well, more distinctive, with an eight-speaker headpiece and all.

In this case, I'm certainly not putting down the speaker—and, for the very high end, the price isn't outrageous, since the speakers (each cabinet includes 18 actual drivers) also include amplifiers (14 of them), so you can skip the amps. (They are also *very* impressive speakers, both as reviewed and as measured, going all the way down to 10Hz and with a claimed audioband response of +0/-3.5 dB from 18Hz to 35KHz.) Oh, and for that matter, they're not power hogs: standby power is less than half a watt. The price? \$81,000: not cheap, but possibly justifiable for some.

What this country needs is a good \$10,000 CD player?

I'm paraphrasing Thomas Marshall, who thought we needed a good five cent cigar, but apparently *Stereophile's* Art Dudley thinks we need a good \$10K CD player—and likes the Luxman D-06u, a “middle-of-the-line” unit that he says is cheaper than a good cartridge, turntable and preamp. Oh, and the Luxman plays SACDs—but only in stereo, and not DVD-audio at all. I *guess* it's enormously better than a more-capable \$500 Oppo unit; I'm not sure just how, but then I don't “get” Art Dudley.

When 10 watts is really 0.6 watts

This is a case where I'm really looking at John Atkinson's measurement sidebar to Herb Reichert's (favorable) review of the Woo Audio WA5, a \$5,899 integrated amplifier that has those lovely tubes that True Audio-philés love so much.

Reichert seems to like it primarily as a headphone amp, where he calls it “a Darwinian step toward a new renaissance of audio humanism in which headphones will become the transducers of choice for a select breed of refined audio connoisseurs.” Whew. He also loved it with speakers.

Atkinson, on the other hand, looks at that measurement: rated at 10Wpc (albeit at 3% THD, a distortion level that's only “high fidelity” when tubes are involved), he measured 618mW (that's 0.6 watts) at 1% THD (the usual limit for power measurement) and 3W at 3% THD, less than one-third of the rated power.

As usual in a case like this, Atkinson delivers the truth coated with easily-decoded caramel:

It is difficult to sum up the Woo Audio WA5's measured performance. Looked at in traditional terms, it didn't do well on the test bench: Its low power output and high distortion will not be too much of an issue with headphones but would seem to rule the WA5 out of contention for driving loudspeakers. But, of course, the bent transfer function responsible for those failings is due to the designer's decision to use a single-ended output stage topology. Considered in that light, the WA5 performed better than I would have expected.

Indeed.

Audio Oddities: February 2017

Stereophile has been doing something unusual in magazine terms for some time now: the first page (p. 3 because the covers are counted), before the table of contents, is a one-page op-ed “As We See It.” It’s rarely by the magazine’s editor (John Atkinson), but in February 2017 it was, entitled “The Price Event Horizon.” It’s worth [reading in full](#), with Atkinson’s musings on whether very high-end audio component prices are reaching an event horizon (Atkinson briefly explains the real event horizon):

Similarly, if the prices of cost-no-object audio components are not merely increasing, but growing at faster and faster rates, those at the highest level will also, in effect, cease to exist, as far as readers of this magazine are concerned.

Examples of what leads him to this musing? Visits to Rockport Technologies and a YG Acoustics dealer to audition new loudspeakers—speakers that cost, respectively, \$149,500 and \$266,000. That’s right: a quarter-megabuck for a pair of speakers!

Atkinson notes that *Stereophile* has reviewed speakers costing \$210,000 a pair (would it surprise you to learn that Michal Fremer, after reviewing them, *purchased* the review samples—at, of course, some undisclosed reviewer’s discount?). Atkinson said in a 2011 talk that “If all someone is offered is a \$150,000 pair of speakers...that person will walk away from this hobby, or build his or her system by buying only used components. Either consumer choice turns the price spiral into a death spiral for manufacturers.”

He wonders where the boundary might be: at what price does a high-end product effectively “cease to exist” for a “normal” audiophile? \$99,000 amplifiers (the estimable Fremer again)? A \$114,000 pair of speakers? Atkinson “my frugal self” was enthusiastic in reviewing \$42,750 speakers.

His close:

All I can say is that *Stereophile* will continue to cover as broad a spectrum of audio products at *all* price levels as possible. As we have always done.

True—although some reviewers sometimes seem to think that anything that’s reasonably priced can’t be very good.

An addendum: Just as I tend to forget that *Stereophile* makes some (most?) of its editorial content freely available online (presumably after a brief delay, but that’s not obvious), I forget that there are sometimes comments on the online content. And the comments here are interesting (yes, you *can* read the comments without going bananas). Worth a look.

A bit later in that same issue, Michael Fremer delivers another “only vinyl can really sound good” rant with the title “Driving the Vinyl Deniers Crazy!” He comments near the top:

...today's audio market is well populated with luxury phono preamps costing \$30,000 and up. That this fact drives the anti-vinyl crowd absolutely crazy only adds to our pleasure.

Wha? As one who abandoned vinyl decades ago, why would it make me crazy that well-heeled folks spend the price of a pretty good car on just one component? I might find that foolish, but lots of people do lots of foolish things. Still: my sense is that Fremer equates reasonably-priced with inferior, and the review that follows (of a \$28,000 phono preamp described as “eye-poppingly gorgeous” and having some bizarre ergonomic traits—the RCA jacks won't hold onto RCA plugs until they've *warmed up* enough) does nothing to lessen that sense. (Ah, but it doesn't have tubes, so it can't be *quite* good enough...)

Also in that issue, Herb Reichert reviews what really is a medium-priced (or to some low-priced) turntable, Rega Research's Planar 3 (\$1,145 with a good tonearm *and* a good cartridge). He'd wondered about the “Rega sound,” its ability to “out-boogie” other turntables, and investigated. He found two things. First, Regas run a little fast. But what's more interesting is that this one, at least, is microphonic: not only would a tap on the plinth (the base) be audible...

Then, with the phono stage turned off and the Rega playing an LP of Gregorian chant, I held the stethoscope to the plinth. I could make out the words the choir was singing. I couldn't believe it.

So what?

Just as we can hear harmonic distortion in amplifiers or jitter in digital systems, I feel certain that any noise produced by the motor and transmitted to and by the plinth *must* contribute to any turntable's basic sound character. How much? Only a little—I think. But maybe a *big* little.

The new Planar 3 played Music with a capital *M*. It rocked, it swung, it slipped and slid. It delivered human-scaled musical art. It played solo piano with stupendous rigor, weight, and expression. However...

I suspect that the noise of the Planar 3's motor, coupled with that sing-along plinth echo, contributed not only to the slight punchy opacity I perceived, but also, maybe, to my perception and *enjoyment* of musical flow. I wonder: if the Rega's bearing, plinth, and tonearm are literally “playing along” with the music, could they not also be microscopically doubling the notes, hitting the beats extra hard, and reiterating the music's rhythms a little more than those of other turntables? I think these subtle noise effects I've uncovered might be emphasizing rhythms and encouraging us to tap our feet, nod our heads, and groove along. I think they might actually be *good* things.

In other words: *euphonic distortion*. A phrase you rarely see in *Stereophile* but one I've long believed has much to do with the love of tube-based

equipment and *possibly* a preference for vinyl over digital. It's rare to see it acknowledged.

Audio Oddities: March 2017

Remember earlier when John Atkinson stepped softly around the disastrous test results of a unit the reviewer *loved*? In the March 2017 *Stereophile* [Art Dudley reviewed](#) the Larsen HiFi 8 loudspeakers, which go for \$6,995 and are, shall we say, unusual. Of course, Dudley *loves* unusual, and has his own way of expressing it. Of these Swedish speakers in a slightly broader context he says:

Scandinavian speakers are exactly like salt licorice, if salt licorice could transform electrical signals into soundwaves.

He liked them a lot, both in spite of and because of their eccentricities.

Then there's Atkinson's measurements. You can read them yourself, but here's Atkinson's conclusion:

AD wrote: "once I'd sat down and acclimated myself to the Larsens' style of sound, the music itself was extremely satisfying. I never felt at a loss"; and "When I dropped the Larsen 8 loudspeakers into my system and set about enjoying them as a normal person might, I approached that ideal: I was *immensely* happy." In my considered opinion, however, the Larsen 8's measured performance reveals its audio engineering to be flawed. Like the legendary curate's egg, this is a speaker that is "good in parts," I feel.

If you're not familiar with "curate's egg," [the Wikipedia article](#) will do nicely. (At least as of July 13, 2017...)

The manufacturer loved the review but decided to deal with Atkinson's measurements by deriding his techniques:

John Atkinson's attempts to apply irrelevant, conventional measuring techniques to this innovative speaker design, in an effort to somehow make the speaker fit those methods—as if it were a conventional, symmetrical box speaker placed against the wall—makes his measurements quite misleading. And nearfield measurements like these are not possible with many drivers firing in various directions. Larsen measures to determine how both speakers actually perform in the room—not how they would perform in a room without walls.

To measure how Larsen speakers actually perform in the room, we measure at the listening position—and not only the direct sound of the speakers, but the total sound, which includes reflections from the room. This is just like in a good concert hall, where direct sounds from the instruments blend with reflections from the walls. Voices and instruments heard without these reflections lose their natural timbres.

The human brain knows that reflections are a fact of life; not hearing reflections sounds unnatural.

So Atkinson added a tiny clarification:

To clarify: In the Measurements section that accompanies Art Dudley's review of the Larsen 8, fig.7 was taken at the listening position in my room, and does, therefore, include not just the direct sound of the speakers, but also the reflections from the room boundaries. The in-room measurement is not at odds with the quasi-anechoic measurements in figs.3–6.

Almost as though after 30+ years doing this stuff, Atkinson might actually know what he's doing.

Audio Oddities: April 2017

A note along the way: if you wonder whether *Sound & Vision* and *Stereophile* are competitors, the answer is either “Sort of” or “They used to be.” Now, both (formerly from two different publishers) are published by the same company, TEN: The Enthusiast Network (formerly Source Interlink), perhaps better known for its automotive and surfer/skateboard/snowboard magazines. Meanwhile:

The *Sound & Vision* letters pages were interesting because a number of readers took exception to the editor's snarkiness about any audio technology he doesn't personally covet—such as FM tuners in receivers, since without a tuner a receiver is really an integrated amp. He responds by noting that, being *up to date*, he listens to NPR via TuneIn streaming on his Sonos system, which I guess makes it internet-based enough to be Modern and thus OK. He doubles-down on his snarkiness and *of course* uses “inevitable” to describe the fate of anything not suitably “modern.” Just like 3D TV was inevitable (which *S&V* pushed pretty hard) until it wasn't...

It's a trend, I guess. The review in the same issue of Rotel's A12 Integrated Amplifier (which is *called* an integrated amp, not a receiver) notes that Rotel makes other equipment, with this charming phrasing:

The company offers an assortment that includes integrated amps, a pre-amp, power amp, and CD players (remember CD players?)...

Different writer, same attitude: not only have all CDs disappeared, but that happened so long ago that if you even *remember* them you may be old.

Oh, but not just *any* digital music...a review of a pricey smartphone in the same issue has this passage:

Remember the iPod? Why carry two devices when you can get by with one?

The phone in question (an LG) costs \$672 to \$830 *with* contract. The review claims that the unit doesn't sound as good as a “top-of-the-line dedicated music player” but does “compete effectively” with portable players

with “low- to mid-three-figure price tags.” There are no test results of any sort, so we have only the reviewer’s word for this. (Same writer as the Rotel review; not the same as the editor, but the same attitude.)

We’ll close with Michael Fremer’s review of CH Precision’s P1 phono preamp in *Stereophile*. He likes it as well as his pricey reference preamp or maybe better, depending on the cartridge used. But this one may even be too expensive for Fremer: \$48,000, or if you *really* want performance, \$89,000 for two mono units. For a phono preamp. (OK, and its optional outboard power supply, but it seems to me that once you’re in this stratosphere you might just as well aim higher.)

The April 2017 issue also has the semiannual Recommended Components listing, 76 pages of small type. Since I did a possible-systems writeup for the October 2016 version, I’ll skip it this time.

Audio Oddities: May 2017

It’s when *Sound & Vision* does *not* offer a “Top Pick” award that it gets interesting—as in a HandsOn semi-review of the Adcom Luna Wireless Speaker, an almost-circular black thingie (13.5” across with a big hole in the upper half and up to 4.25” thick for its stand) that may or may not be “beautiful to look at” (Bob Ankosko’s phrase)...

...but even if you’re not a fan of its modern design, there’s no denying that Luna is unusual in the world of portable wireless speakers.

What makes it unusual?

The looks. Period.

Well, that and a \$599 price for a distinctly underperforming wireless speaker (one that can be hung on a wall in a strange arrangement). Adcom’s explanation for producing an expensive not-very-good speaker? Basically that you’re really buying an art piece. Meh.

Later in that *Sound & Vision* issue, Rob Sabin’s article on projection TV is more honest than I’d expect on what makes *S&V*’s editorial philosophy different from, for example, *Stereophile* or *The Absolute Sound*:

We’ve been pounding away in these pages on the benefits of Ultra HD.

There it is. The magazine has been weak on honest discussions of the reality that Ultra HD’s extra resolution is useless unless you sit closer than 9’ from a 65” screen (roughly) or on discussions of just how you get Ultra HD content without spending a lot of money (certainly not on broadcast TV). Instead, a constant stream of *it’s the future and you probably haven’t purchased a new TV or repurchased your favorite movies for at least two years so GO OUT AND BUY BUY BUY*. They were *pounding away* on the wonders of 3D TV for years...and still seem slow to get the message that we’re not buying it. (The predecessors to *S&V*, such as *Stereo Review*, never seemed *quite* so focused on Pounding Away at the Hot New Tech of the

Year, but these are different times.) The closing paragraph in the roundup...just before a review of a \$35,000 projector:

Hopefully, we've disproven the myth that projection systems are either too expensive or simply no longer serving a useful function in a world of ever-expanding flat screen TVs. Projectors are affordable, adaptable to different living situations, and still the best path to the big picture. So...what are you waiting for? [Emphasis added.]

The last page of that *S&V* issue is another "Premiere Design" piece drooling over (but not actually testing) some "designey" piece of gear. This time, it's the HiFiMan Shangri-La Electrostatic Headphone System—a fairly nice-looking pair of headphones that comes with its own custom amplifier (with *eight tubes*, all of them highly visible). It sells for a mere \$50,000—but then, four of its tubes are the "legendary 300b," and legends don't come cheap. [Note: it's an amp with a volume control; you still need a preamp/control center and signal sources, presumably at a level suitable to share space with \$50,000 headphones.]

On to *Stereophile*—same publisher but a very different philosophy, and much less devoted to selling me the Trend of the Year. I won't spend much time on Art Dudley's bizarro column, where he admits to buying the *same exact unusual foodstuff* three times even though it clearly wasn't worthwhile and somehow turns that into an object lesson, and in the process manages to sneer at Elvis Presley (or at least at Graceland) for not being, I dunno, tasteful enough for His Dudleyness.

I'm not even sure it's worth spending time on Herb Reichert's review of the Hegel Music Systems Mohican, a \$5,000 CD player that's apparently well-engineered but stands apart mostly because *all* it does is play CDs: no SACDs, DVD-Audio, Blu-ray Audio or acting as a digital-to-analog converter for other sources. Does it actually play better than, say, a \$500 Oppo that can play all those other media? Not clear, but Reichert calls it "future-proof" because it doesn't attempt to provide for any future needs.

It is nice to see that Wilson Audio Specialties now makes a "medium-priced" loudspeaker, something in between the \$48,500 Alexia and the \$210,000 Alexandria XLF (*not* Wilson's high end: that's the \$685,000 WAMM Master Chronosonic!). Michael Fremer reviewed the new speaker, the Alexx, and who better? (He owns a pair of older Alexandrias.) This one's only \$109,000—and, overall, it's good enough that Fremer was actually considering selling his Alexandria and buying Alexxs instead. (As usual for non-wireless speakers, all prices are per pair.)

What? You didn't know there were such things as \$685,000 home loudspeakers? You say your whole house didn't cost that much? (Our house didn't, and we live in the notoriously expensive SF Bay Area.)

And that's it for a year of audio oddities.

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By the way: if you found value in the January 2017 *Cites & Insights*, which looked at gold OA journals and “journals” that were *not* in DOAJ, and if you’d find value in a followup report seeing how those journals and “journals” were doing in the last half of 2016 and first half of 2017, you might contact me (waltcrawford@gmail.com) about possible support of such a project. Soon.

Masthead

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