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**The Ballet Bravo Project Volume Guide:
Critical Analyses, Histories, and Interviews**

Online preprint edition. Contributing editors: Annika Betz, Mortimer L. Carr, Dominic Granger, Daryl Heckman, Julian Levitz, Tassilo Osterberg, Cheryl Rainer, Eugene Sandbrook, Yuki Suyama, DeMarcus Underwood, Ira Vasquez, and Harold Stossel-Williams.

The Ballet Bravo Series

The Ballet Bravo Series celebrates 125 years of cowboy song and dance in cinema and television, drawing music and clips from 4,673 motion pictures and television programs.

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 01 | Ballet Bravo

“Surprises aplenty when Texas rancher John T. Dance travels to Paris to deliver his racehorse, Bucky, to Zizi Marie, ballet star at the Folies Bergère. Soon sparks fly as J.T. settles business with some fancy-pants aristocrats on race day. And when Jacques Dee, the lead male danseur goes lame, it’s up to John T. Dance to show all Paris a thing or three as he takes the stage to dance the Cotton-Eyed Joe.”

—“Ballet Bravo” (1953), as described in the 1953 issue of *Western Movie Hits* magazine.

Released in 1953 to rave reviews, “Ballet Bravo” was a commercial as well as critical success. It earned \$21 million worldwide against a budget of \$1.5 million. The film also holds the unique distinction of being the first—and until “Shanghai Knights” (2003)—only Western in which a 19th-century American cowboy travels to Europe.

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 02 | Bobcat Bob Showdown (Instrumental)

Cultural critic Shelly Hoel argues in her essay, “Fringe Leather Manhood: How Buffalo Bill and Bobcat Bob Performed Masculinity in the American West,” that Wild West shows’ “performative masculinity created a false memory of the American West.” She cites the idiom “circle the wagons”—to unite against an external threat—as one example.

Real wagon trains sometimes formed circles to corral livestock at night, but Wild West shows turned circled wagons into exciting set pieces where settlers defended themselves against attacks by “savage Indians.” The staging allowed Native American performers to race around the wagons on horseback in open-air arenas, whooping, hollering, and chanting war cries while the action remained clearly visible to the audience.

These enormously successful spectacles transformed harsh frontier life into popular entertainment and, with the advent of cinema, reached millions of people around the world. Showmen like Buffalo Bill Cody and Bobcat Bob Jenkins became international celebrities by appearing in Edison Kinetoscope shorts as early as 1894 and later reenacting their exploits for

the big screen. In the silent one-reeler “The Life of Bobcat Bob” (1911), Jenkins stars as himself, dreaming of his frontier adventures, including an attack on his wagon train along the Oregon Trail.

While Hoel claims that “cinema inherited more than just the Wild West show’s action and spectacle; it also inherited its carefully staged ideas about masculinity, white male identity, and American expansion,” film professor Nancy Radcliffe notes that “the Wild West shows and the movies they inspired were a lot of fun.”

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 03 | Arizona!

Emerging from the cultural upheaval of the Great Depression and World War II, the Hollywood Western musical gave frontier mythology new life. Films such as “The Singin’ Spurs” (1948), “Square Dance Jubilee” (1949), “Annie Get Your Gun” (1950), and “Calamity Jane” (1953) used the spectacle of music, dance, and gunplay to explore America’s rapidly changing global identity.

In her study, “Plenty of Heart and Plenty of Hope: An Analysis of Social and Historical Implications in Post-WWII Western Musical Films,” Katelyn Lister argues that Western musicals looked to an idealized past to make sense of a changing postwar America. By emphasizing romance, pageantry, and traditional gender roles, these extravagant musicals sought to “reinforce the values [American soldiers] had fought to defend.”

“Arizona!” (1956) took this postwar fantasy to its most colorful and fanciful extreme. Showing gun-toting pioneer women trading their newfound independence for marriage, domesticity, and the promise of the American Dream, “Arizona!” culminates in the first dance duel in cinematic history.

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 04 | Wild West Boogie (Instrumental)

“Dance was the central axis of action in many cinema Westerns of the 1950s. During this classic period, war-weary veterans returning home from the horrors of World War II sought relief from the shocking violence they had witnessed. And yet, for these men, viewing the spectacle of war had developed in them a deep craving, an unmet taste for visual excitement. To meet this desire, movies and dance stepped in. I’m talking about the lively jigs that bolstered the otherwise barren cinematic action that played out in the American Western, of course. While the tension of a gunfight was over in scant orgasmic moments, cowboy dance offered a more durable, showy pleasure of manly movement, not unlike the pleasure many of these veterans got by driving a brand-new automobile for the first time. By the 1960s, the Western’s dancing cowboy was spectacle incarnate: the fitted shirt, the tight trousers, the polished boots, the flash

of silver spurs, the rhythmic thrust of hips and heels as strong male bodies commanded the screen. Every variation mattered. A cowboy schottische conveys something altogether different from a ranch-hand two-step, while a properly executed quadrille reveals yet another dimension of frontier masculinity and a baroque understanding of the male body in motion. A well-timed heel click can reveal more about a cowboy than pages of dialogue or even a bar fight. I've spent years cataloguing such moments, as well as the heartbreaking occasions when filmmakers failed to recognize the possibilities before them. To me, the saddest thing of all is the number of Westerns that could've had a great dance scene but didn't. In 'The Good, the Bad and the Ugly,' for example, it's tragic that there wasn't at least one scene of the Man With No Name dancing with Tuco."

—Film historian Miles H. Sheridan, from his presentation "How the West Was Waltzed," recorded at the Popular Culture Association Annual Conference, 1991.

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 05 | Cats of Calico

At the height of Calico's silver boom from 1883 to 1885, this California mining town boasted more than 500 mines, a population of 1,200 people, and over 2,000 cats. Fortune seekers came from near and far hoping to strike it rich; many stayed for the calming presence of the town's feline residents.

The Great Cat Craze of Calico later influenced many Hollywood Westerns, making stray cats a beloved fixture of the genre. John Wayne famously shared the screen with an orange tabby named General Sterling Price in "True Grit" (1969). The same tabby reprised its role alongside Wayne six years later in "Rooster Cogburn" (1975). The uncredited tabby was simply known as "Ginger Cat" in production records.

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 06 | Day of the Dead (Instrumental)

During the 1960s and early 1970s, independent Mexican filmmakers developed a distinctive albeit short-lived Western subgenre inspired by Día de los Muertos traditions. Popularly known as *el western del Día de Muertos* (Day of the Dead Western), these films combined desert adventure with colorful celebrations of death and the darker imagery of the Mexican skeletal folk saint Santa Muerte.

In his book *Mex-Westerns: A History*, Daniel González notes the Day of the Dead Western's distinctly Mestizo Baroque sensibility, merging Indigenous ceremonial traditions with Spanish colonial aesthetics in exuberant compositions rich in color, ornament, and religious symbolism.

Unfortunately, a 1982 fire at Mexico City's Depósito Cinematográfico Azcapotzalco (Azcapotzalco Film Storage Facility) destroyed the only known prints of many of these movies,

while others were reduced to fragments and incomplete reels. Among the material salvaged from the facility after the fire were negatives containing scenes from “Los Jinetes del Esqueleto” (“The Skeleton Riders,” 1965), “Seis Tumbas para Sonora” (“Six Graves to Sonora,” 1969), and “La Balada de El Calavera” (“The Ballad of El Calavera,” 1973). The recovered footage offers a rare glimpse into one of the more obscure chapters in the history of the Mexican Western.

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 07 | Guide Us O Lord

During the mid-twentieth century, Hollywood embraced a cycle of religious musical Westerns where church revival meetings and tales of redemption shared equal billing with six-shooters and song. These movies blended gospel hymns with lavish spectacles that placed flawed cowboys on the long, uncertain road toward grace.

The tradition drew upon an older Christian understanding of sacred music as an active force in the struggle between sin and salvation. In his study “Sacred Weaponry: The Historical and Theological Role of Gospel Music in Spiritual Warfare and Liberation in Christianity,” Sakhiseni Joseph Yende traces this idea to the Book of Acts in the Bible, where Paul and Silas sing hymns in prison before an earthquake breaks their chains.

In films like “The Gospel Trail” (1953) and “Singin’ Savior Saloon” (1959), musical numbers function not simply as entertainment, but as a form of spiritual warfare. They become a conduit for divine intervention and liberation. The hymn accomplishes what the six-shooter cannot: it saves the cowboy’s soul.

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 08 | The Last Ride

While making Gore Verbinski’s “The Lone Ranger” (2013), the film crew went to extraordinary lengths to put real trains onscreen. At Rio Puerco, just outside Albuquerque, New Mexico, the production constructed a functioning five-mile railroad loop using 3,889,425 pounds of rail materials and built two full-size moving trains for the film’s elaborate action sequences. Another mile of track was constructed near Creede, Colorado.

In his *Railway Quarterly* article, “Tracks Across the Screen: Spatial Rogowski Theory and the Hollywood Western,” railroad theorist Prescott Howard examines the role of trains in the Western. Drawing on Spatial Rogowski Theory, Howard shows how the railroads seen onscreen reshape communities by connecting them to the Eastern United States and altering patterns of migration and economic activity. As he writes, “In the Western, every mile of track alters the social geography of the story, causing upheaval among Indigenous tribes and creating dramatic tension.”

In films like “Steam!” (1957) and “Iron Horse, Broken Heart” (1961), the locomotive is a symbol of progress; it is also an agent of disruption, carrying settlers, commerce, and buffalo hunters into previously isolated lands. The train serves both as a metaphor and as the narrative engine for Hollywood storytelling, propelling the action forward. But modernity comes at a cost. To quote Howard, “What made the Old West great also killed it.”

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 09 | Home In the West

During Hollywood’s golden age of the B-Western, Octavian Pictures found unlikely success with its “Dos Gringos” pictures, a series of hour-long films based on the pulp Western novels by Owen Payne. Between 1936 and 1944, the studio released 49 “Dos Gringos” pictures in all.

The films follow two U.S. marshals who travel the Arizona and New Mexico Territories dispensing justice and frequently arguing about how to do it. Succeeding installments such as “Dos Gringos in Chloride” (1937), “Dos Gringos in Silver City” (1939), and “Dos Gringos in Bisbee” (1942) all proved as popular as the original picture. Much of the series’ success was due to the use of “Home in the West” as its theme song.

By 1936, “Home in the West” was already an American standard, appearing in dozens of stage productions, talkies, and Westerns. Beginning with the first “Dos Gringos” picture, the song was featured in every subsequent film of the series. Sometimes sung by the two lawmen around a campfire and sometimes heard instrumentally over the opening credits, “Home in the West” became inseparable from the series. Even when new actors took over the roles, Octavian retained the familiar melody, using it in all 49 pictures.

Regarded by *Cinema Monthly* as the first buddy Western, “Dos Gringos” was an important precursor to the modern buddy movie. It has even been rumored that “Dos Gringos” inspired Akira Kurosawa’s 1949 Japanese film “Nora inu” (“Stray Dog”), itself an important precursor to the modern buddy cop film. Which, in essence, makes “Dos Gringos” the first buddy cop movie as well as the first buddy Western.

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 10 | The Silent Searcher

Against the backdrop of the Civil Rights Movement and the social upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s, Blaxploitation Westerns sensationalized the battle against the white power structure of America. Gun-toting black protagonists seeking justice brought the politics and attitude of contemporary black experiences into the mythology of the Old West, upending conventional Hollywood narratives of race, heroism, and righteousness.

The correction was long overdue. Historians estimate that roughly 25 percent of working cowboys during the late nineteenth century were African American, many of them formerly enslaved—a presence largely erased from popular songs, dime novels, and Hollywood Westerns. Films such as “El Condor” (1970), “Preacher Buck Unleashed” (1973), and “Boss Baadaasss” (1975) reclaimed that cinematic landscape, placing black protagonists at the center of stories from which they had long been excluded.

In his influential *Journal of American Film Studies* essay “Sticking It to Whitie: Black Hats, Black Power and the Blaxploitation Western,” philosopher, activist, and film scholar Shamar Brown examines the remarkable cycle of black Westerns produced between 1970 and 1976.

For Brown, these films did more than simply place black heroes in traditionally white roles. As he writes, “The Black cowboy of the 1970s does not simply ride into the Old West; he rides into the mythology of white America. He comes with swagger and style, with anger and attitude, with a new sense of Black power, Black purpose, and Black possibility. By occupying the Western landscape, he becomes a cathartic presence, contesting who has the right to inhabit the American past, who gets to be its hero, whose story gets told, and who gets to shoot who to make audiences cheer.”

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 11 | Hoedown Corral (Instrumental)

The cowboy hat is the most recognizable piece of apparel in American history, but in reality nineteenth-century cowboys wore derbies, sombreros, flat caps, and battered military kepis left over from the Civil War, not cowboy hats as we know them today. Even John B. Stetson’s original 1865 “Boss of the Plains” hat had a high, straight-sided crown with rounded corners and a wide, stiff, flat brim; it lacked the creases, curves, and style of the modern cowboy hat.

The distinctive cowboy hat that we associate with country music, the Old West, and classic Westerns was actually invented by Hollywood, and mostly by one man: Shep Hauser. A German-Jewish haberdasher from Indianapolis who joined the Hollywood Costume Company in 1922, Hauser developed exaggerated crowns, curled brims, and unique silhouettes to solve a simple problem: low-budget Westerns needed audiences to recognize unfamiliar actors instantly. Heroes got bold, perfectly shaped, light-colored hats; villains got dark, battered, lower-profile ones. According to *Western Movie Hits* magazine, Hauser could read a screenplay, look at an actor’s face, and know exactly what hat the character needed.

Hauser crafted thousands of hats during his fifty-five-year career. His designs became so familiar that real cowboys eventually imitated Hollywood and Hollywood then imitated them. Shep Hauser set out to make Western characters instantly recognizable and ended up creating the emblem of America.

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 12 | Bad Bad Naughty Naughty

“The dance which accompanies the striptease from beginning to end is in no way an erotic element.”

—French cultural critic Roland Barthes, in his essay “Striptease.”

The striptease sequences in most classic Westerns were about flirtation and ribald humor rather than anything approaching explicit sexuality. For censors during Hollywood’s Hays Code period, maintaining that distinction was important.

But a few Westerns pushed the boundaries, and none did so as brazenly as “Madame Bovine’s Lover” (1944). The musical comedy starred the busty but then unknown actress Becky Stallworth as Madame Bovine, a popular burlesque dancer at a frontier brothel. As fashion writer Eleanor Rosen later chronicled in “Becky and the Bra That Made Her Famous,” the film’s producer personally designed Stallworth’s brassiere to accentuate her cleavage, believing the principles of modern aircraft design applied equally well to women’s undergarments. Stallworth later claimed the contraption was so uncomfortable that she secretly wore her own bra during filming.

Completed in 1942 after a troubled production, the picture remained unreleased for nearly two years due to objections from the Production Code Administration. During that time, the producer released provocative production stills of Stallworth to keep her in the public eye. The photographs, along with pin-up illustrations of Stallworth, circulated widely among American servicemen during World War II. Her image became so popular that Army Air Force crews painted Madame Bovine as nose art on B-17 bombers and P-40 fighters, making Stallworth one of the war’s most recognizable glamour girls.

With Stallworth’s newfound popularity and the PCA controversy generating national publicity, “Madame Bovine’s Lover” finally received a wide release in 1944. Audiences expecting something scandalous discovered a relatively innocuous Western musical comedy filled with saloon songs and dancing cowboys, but no actual burlesque routines.

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 13 | Love Bleeding Out

“The Western hero is defined by a stoicism that comes at a terrible price. He may ride faultlessly, face death without losing his composure, and resort to violence when his code demands it, but he remains a fundamentally lonely and melancholy figure. Love offers the possibility of another life, one governed by intimacy rather than violence, yet the Western rarely allows him to inhabit that world for long. Whether felled by a gun, an accident, or simple misfortune, the hero frequently leaves behind a wife, lover, or family forced to bear the emotional consequences of his fate. Death preserves the hero’s honor while grief becomes a

burden for the living. The cowboy rides away or dies with his boots on; those left behind must somehow carry on. This is one of the Western's cruelest paradoxes: the qualities that make a man heroic may also make lasting happiness impossible. Love may be secondary to the cowboy code, but it is often what gives his loss its meaning. The hero's death brings his story to a fitting conclusion, but for those who loved him, there is no such resolution. The hero dies with honor; true love is left to mourn in silence."

—Kenneth Moore, "Love and Loss in the Classical Western," *Journal of the American Western*

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 14 | Dancehall Days (Instrumental)

"I'm the kind of choreographer who plans out everything before the rehearsal."

—choreographer Orville Landry, discussing his iconic ballet "Jesse James" (1939)

Few Western musical films demonstrated the limits of such planning more spectacularly than "Claim Jumpers of '49" (1955). Its climactic sequence was supposed to unfold in an ornate Sierra Nevada opera house. A drunken confrontation among prospectors would erupt into a dance involving more than 100 performers, culminating in an elaborate showstopper built around the film's star, Nicholas "Nic" Dutton.

There was one problem: Dutton could not dance. For weeks, choreographer Theodore Kessler worked privately with the actor on the soft-shoe and tap combination planned for the "dazzling" finale. Dutton struggled with basic footwork and staying on the beat. Kessler gradually stripped away steps and shortened Dutton's solo passages, but every concession required painstaking revisions to the choreography around him. Formations were shifted, entrances retimed, and entire eight-counts reworked to accommodate the leading man.

Dutton's drinking made matters worse. He often arrived at afternoon rehearsals unable to recall choreography he had performed that morning. According to Kessler, rehearsals were eventually scheduled before noon because "Nic could remember the steps in the morning. At three o'clock, he couldn't even remember where he was."

By the time filming began, the sequence had become so precisely constructed around Dutton that a single missed step could throw off the entire company. Dancers collided, cues were missed, and long takes repeatedly collapsed seconds before completion. After 35 days of filming, Kessler finally solved what the crew called "the Nic Dutton Problem" by abandoning the synchronized dance altogether. In the finished film, Dutton simply walks onto the stage and bows before an opera house of empty seats. Critics later praised the scene for its raw vulnerability.

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 15 | Powwow of the Dog (Instrumental)

While filming the Spahn Ranch sequence in “Once Upon a Time in Hollywood” (2019), Quentin Tarantino insisted that dogs be visible in every shot because “There’s movement, there’s always movement going on. The place is alive.”

Classic Hollywood Westerns relied on the same cinematic instinct. Whether wandering the streets of dusty towns, protecting cattle, or trailing behind cowboys, dogs lent frontier settings a natural vitality, making the Old West feel inhabited rather than merely staged.

The most sought-after canine performer in these scenes was an Australian Kelpie named Juniper, a stray puppy who attached herself to a U.S. Army war-dog unit during the Italian Campaign in World War II. The pup took a particular liking to Army dog handler Horton Wallace, and the feeling was mutual. Wallace brought her home to Tarzana, California, after the war.

Wallace soon found work as an animal wrangler in Hollywood, where Juniper proved ideally suited to Westerns. Kelpies and other cattle dogs had long been working animals in the Western Territories, giving Juniper a period-authentic appearance. Her wartime experience also proved valuable in the chaos of a film set. Shouting, horses, crowds, sudden commotion, even gunfire, never spooked her. Juniper was a perennial favorite among casts and crews.

Directors soon realized Juniper had an unusual specialty: doing almost nothing, yet doing just enough. She wagged her tail beneath wagons, lapped water in saloons, guarded jailhouses, and lingered at the edges of countless scenes—always the bridesmaid, never the star. Juniper appeared in 167 films between 1946 and her death in 1955, the majority of them Westerns, making her the most filmed dog in motion-picture history. She never received a screen credit. Her final picture, released after her death, ended with a simple dedication: “In Memory of Juniper.”

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 16 | Whiskey and Women

In his paper “Shifting Perspectives on Drinking: Alcohol Portrayals in American Films,” alcohol researcher Robin Room observed that in many American films, drinking was “such a normalized activity that it becomes essentially a background phenomenon.” Alcohol did not need to drive the plot or define a character; its very ordinariness revealed how thoroughly drinking was absorbed into the social world depicted onscreen.

In Hollywood Westerns, whiskey flowed as naturally as conversation, whether in saloons, on the trail, or at home. This convention had a historical basis. Whiskey accompanied Western expansion, serving as medicine and a trade good while also providing recreation and consolation. However, this ubiquity came at an enormous social cost. Heavy drinking contributed to dysfunction, violence, and often early death.

Stan Clewett's five-part documentary series "Whiskey" (1999) shows that alcohol was more essential to the Old West than traditional histories have acknowledged. Whiskey was not simply a diversion from frontier hardship; it was the antidote to hardship. It dulled pain and fear, relieved loneliness and boredom, and provided important bonding rituals in isolated communities.

But Clewett's documentary also advanced an even more provocative thesis: the colonization of the American West would have been nearly impossible without whiskey. Life on the frontier demanded an extraordinary tolerance for risk. Crossing deserts, prospecting for minerals, driving cattle through open country, and settling remote territory all required men to proceed despite dangers that sober minds would choose to avoid. As shown in countless Hollywood Westerns, whiskey lowered inhibitions, loosened judgment, and made reckless confidence easier to mistake for courage. In this interpretation, habitual drinking was not only one of the frontier's great social problems; it was also one of the Old West's greatest assets.

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 17 | Voices of Freedom

The oldest known figurative representation of a bull was painted on the wall of an Indonesian cave around 40,000 years ago. The enormous image, more than five feet across, depicts a banteng bull in reddish-orange ochre. In his book *Bulls from Borneo to Hollywood*, art critic and prehistorian Charles Merriweather calls this bull "the first great hero of art" and says, "man may have domesticated bulls to some extent, but we've never stopped worshipping them." From Paleolithic cave walls to Hollywood Westerns, bulls in motion "symbolize massive physical power, fierce independence, and vigorous fertility."

"The Stud of San Jacinto" (1957) combined all three of these qualities into one unforgettable bovine. The film centers on a prize Hereford bull brought to a struggling Texas ranch to improve its herd. Appropriately named Valentino, the enormous bull proves spectacularly successful at his intended purpose. Unfortunately, he also possesses a sexual appetite that becomes increasingly impossible to contain. Valentino breaks through fences, escapes from pens, disrupts cattle drives, and repeatedly wanders onto neighboring ranches in pursuit of receptive cows. Castration offers the obvious solution, but would also eliminate the stud fees upon which the ranch's recovery increasingly depends.

The ranch hands therefore spend much of the film trying to control Valentino without diminishing the productivity that makes him so valuable. Every effort to restrain the bull merely redirects his determination. In the film's climactic sequence, Valentino escapes during San Jacinto's Fourth of July celebration and charges through town after spotting a cow being led in the annual parade.

“The Stud of San Jacinto” was only a modest box-office success upon first release, but became a sleeper hit years later when Hollywood rumors spread that Valentino was modeled on Marlon Brando.

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 18 | Bouncin’ Beavers (Instrumental)

Ralph McCutcheon, the legendary animal trainer of equine stars such as Dice and Highland Dale, disapproved of coercive methods such as whips and prods when working with the animals that appeared in his films. Instead, he preached patience and relied on voice commands, hand signals, and treat rewards. A former Colorado forest ranger, McCutcheon was said to have taught some of his horses a vocabulary of spoken commands, allowing him to direct complicated actions from beside the camera.

His protégés later adopted the same humane techniques. Famously, Rex Talcott spent nine weeks training a turkey named Clarence for a saloon scene in “Odelia’s” (1964). Clarence was required to enter through the swinging doors, cross the crowded saloon, hop onto the bar, and drink from a whiskey glass on cue. The difficulty was not teaching each action individually, Talcott later explained, but getting Clarence to perform the entire sequence without becoming distracted by the actors, lights, and commotion around him. Talcott accomplished the routine using hand commands, kernels of corn, and a variety of clucking sounds; the shot required only two takes.

Clarence subsequently featured in eleven Westerns and television shows, usually performing variations on the same gag. His specialty became entering saloons uninvited. This inevitably led to “A turkey walks into a bar...” jokes among crew members and an appearance on the “Tonight Show.”

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 19 | Here We Go ’Round the Desert Tomb

Child actor Tabitha Lake had an unusual primary school education. She was ten years old when cast in the lead role of the survival Western “Trail of Fears” (1968). Production lasted thirteen months, and Lake celebrated her eleventh birthday on the snow-covered slopes of Donner Pass.

In the 1960s, California imposed strict education requirements on child performers. Children could spend no more than nine hours a day on set. This included five hours of film work, three hours of schooling, and an hour of recreation. A studio teacher was always around to make sure the children were safe, being educated, and not exploited.

“Trail of Fears” was filmed almost entirely on location in remote regions of Utah, Nevada, and Northern California. This meant Lake and seven other child actors, ranging in age from six to fifteen, were taught in trailers, tents, or outdoors—wherever space could be found. The filming schedule had priority over lessons: a child might study for twenty minutes, leave to shoot a horseback scene, then return four hours later to finish a math problem.

In her memoir, *I Was the Kid in the Picture*, Lake recalled practicing long division beside a wagon in Utah and studying the solar system while the production was filming in the Great Basin Desert. For Lake, living a frontier life—even a fake one—brought much of what she encountered in textbooks vividly to life.

Lake continued acting through the 1970s before leaving the profession in 1984. She married, moved to Utah, and became an interior designer before writing her memoir in 2011. Looking back, Lake wrote, “Going to school on a movie set taught us kids a lot of things: how to cuss, drink coffee, kiss boys, but also how to cope with and conquer adversity.”

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 20 | Dance of the Valkyries

The rise of fascism in 1930s Europe forced hundreds of German-speaking filmmakers to flee to Hollywood, bringing with them the visual language of German Expressionism. High-contrast lighting, elongated shadows, and distorted perspectives soon found their way into many American genres, including the Western. The influence extended beyond appearance. Expressionist films often presented a world in which ordinary people were trapped by forces they could neither understand nor control, and where authority itself became the source of terror.

In *From Caligari to Hitler*, film theorist Siegfried Kracauer argues that the recurring images of fear, chaos, and authoritarian figures in the cinema of the Weimar Republic reflected the psychological and social forces that ultimately made Hitler’s rise possible. For Kracauer, popular films reveal the collective psychology of the society that produced them. Again and again, Weimar cinema presents characters caught between chaos and submission, seemingly unable to escape tyranny without surrendering themselves to another form of authority. Kracauer sees Fritz Lang’s criminal mastermind Dr. Mabuse, for example, as an omnipresent tyrant whose power can seemingly reach anyone, anywhere.

That same foreboding sensibility followed émigré filmmakers to Hollywood. In the films of Otto Reinhardt, like “The Gloomings” (1941) and “Incident at Black Swallow” (1948), the traditionally sunlit Western becomes a dark landscape of totalitarianism and paranoia. Isolated communities live under constant threat and enigmatic femme fatales stand as the last unlikely bulwarks against corrupt and evil men.

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 21 | Ride 'Em Hard

In her article “Endless Summer (1964): Consuming Waves and Surfing the Frontier,” film scholar Joan Ormrod shows how surfing reimagined America’s frontier myth, replacing the open range with the open ocean. For Ormrod, the surfer paddling beyond the horizon was another incarnation of the Western explorer pushing into unknown territory.

Hollywood recognized this connection surprisingly early. During the late 1950s and early 1960s, “cowboy surf” Westerns helped move surfing movies from Bud Browne’s pioneering documentaries into mainstream popular culture. Films such as “The Wide Blue Horizon” (1956) and “Pacific Ride” (1958) sent wandering cowboys west until they literally ran out of land.

Filming cowboys riding waves instead of horses required an entirely different production approach. Unlike the heavier 35mm cameras commonly used to shoot Westerns, lightweight, spring-wound 16mm Bolex cameras could be carried onto beaches, boats, and cliffs and operated without batteries or external power. Long telephoto lenses followed surfers from shore, while waterproof housings allowed cameramen to take their cameras into the ocean. Kodachrome and Ektachrome reversal film stocks rendered brilliant blue skies, shimmering water, golden beaches, and brightly colored bikinis with remarkable clarity. For theatrical exhibition, the 16mm footage was often then enlarged to 35mm.

The film crews working on cowboy surfing movies developed their own production culture, complete with specific surf-cowboy jargon. Cowboy stuntmen who learned to ride longboards were known as “surfin’ turfers,” while the movies themselves were called “surf ’n’ turfers.” A grip or gaffer might excitedly announce that he had been hired to work on “another surf ’n’ turfer.” The expression was soon heard in restaurants and bars frequented by the film crews, inevitably shortened to “surf ’n’ turf.” Kodak technicians working at the company’s Hollywood Processing Laboratory used the “cool” California slang when talking to colleagues at corporate headquarters in Rochester, New York. Eventually, the term mutated from its original meaning altogether.

In December 1958, the Los Angeles Times advertised a restaurant’s “Turf ’n Surf Dinner.” Five months later, a Rochester restaurant was advertising “Surf and Turf.” Within a few years, what had once described one of cinema’s most eclectic subgenres was now the nomenclature for a steak-and-seafood dinner.

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 22 | Autumn's Lament (Instrumental)

"In Westerns you were permitted to kiss your horse but never your girl."

—Gary Cooper, two-time Academy Award-winning actor

In her book *Love on the Open Range: Sex, Romance, and the American Western*, film scholar and professor of critical theory Marsha Whitcomb sees a conundrum at the heart of the Hollywood Western. The cowboy rides alone, survives alone, and dies alone. Yet he still needs human connection, and falling in love means giving up that solitude. As Whitcomb writes, "Emotional detachment did not negate the cowboy's desire for intimacy. But intimacy, whether emotional or physical, presents additional obstacles to overcome."

In early Westerns, romantic relationships were staid. A cowboy might kiss his horse or hug his dog, then become almost comically restrained around the woman he loved.

Gradually, as America changed and the sexual revolution began to permeate society, love stories in Westerns became more sexually explicit. The New Hollywood movement brought a more openly expressive kind of romance and sexuality to Western movies. "Cat Ballou" (1965) playfully loosened some of the genre's old romantic conventions, while "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid" (1969) introduced a more sexually frank and unconventional romantic triangle. "Little Big Man" (1970) pushed sexual relationships still further from the traditional Hollywood model, and in "McCabe & Mrs. Miller" (1971), love emerged between a gambler and a brothel madam without ever settling comfortably into conventional domesticity.

The cowboy crossed deserts. He survived savage gunfights. He endured years of separation. But his greatest challenge of all was overcoming cultural norms.

Whitcomb concludes, "After surviving the harsh realities of frontier life and traversing its unforgiving landscapes, sometimes a kiss became more than just a kiss. It became a political statement."

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 23 | Soft Prairie Rhyme

During the Great Depression, singing cowboys became some of the biggest stars in Hollywood. The third most popular performer of the genre was club-footed Bucky Schultz, who arrived in Los Angeles in 1935 at the age of seventeen. With movie-star good looks, an easy baritone, and a natural ability to ride a horse while playing guitar, Bucky quickly found work in horse-opera Westerns.

Nearly as famous as Bucky was his guitar, one of the original fifteen Martin OM-45 Deluxe guitars produced in 1930. Bucky spotted the instrument hanging behind the bar in a Nevada brothel and bought it from the madam for twelve dollars. Or so he said. In reality, Bucky received

the OM-45 for his bar mitzvah in 1931. His father was a successful Bethlehem Steel executive with connections at the Martin Guitar factory in nearby Nazareth, Pennsylvania.

Bucky's other musical trademark was considerably less glamorous. Instead of a conventional guitar pick, he used a flattened grape Nehi bottle cap, which he claimed gave his guitar its distinctive bright, metallic click. Only grape would do. The bottle cap was part sonic preference, part carefully cultivated image: Bucky wanted audiences to see an ordinary fellow drinking the same nickel soda they did, not the privileged son of a wealthy steel executive playing one of the finest guitars money could buy.

By the 1950s, Bucky's world was disappearing. Television was replacing low-budget theatrical Westerns, while new electric guitars from Fender and Gibson and the arrival of rock and roll made the singing cowboy seem increasingly old-fashioned. Octavian Pictures tried to keep Bucky current with lavish Technicolor Westerns, but the added expense only accelerated the end.

Bucky made his final film, "Saddle Songs," in 1956 and retired at thirty-eight. The Singing Cowboy Era was over.

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 24 | Yukon Rag (Instrumental)

Reflecting on the production of "The Revenant" (2015), cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki explained, "We wanted to make a movie that was immersive and visceral. The idea of using natural light came because we wanted the audience to feel...that this stuff is really happening." Filmed in temperatures plunging to minus 40 degrees Fahrenheit, the production endured frostbite, crew defections, and some of the harshest conditions ever faced by a modern film crew.

But those hardships were nothing compared to what the cast and crew of "Yukon Fever" endured in 1926. Director Karl von Thüngen insisted on filming in California's Sierra Nevada mountains "to capture the reality of life in the Yukon."

Von Thüngen and company remained on location through an exceptionally severe winter. Arc lights failed, film became brittle, and equipment disappeared beneath overnight snow squalls. During one violent blizzard, cameramen struggling to change film magazines on their Bell & Howell 2709 cameras in heavy gloves accidentally exposed several thousand feet of 35mm negative shot earlier that day, destroying nearly ten hours of work. Numerous actors and crew members suffered frostbite, while others developed snow blindness from sunlight reflected off the white mountainside.

The production's most notorious problem came as the snow melted. A trained black bear named Betty was brought in for the film's pivotal dance scenes. Unfortunately, filming coincided with

bear mating season, and the in-heat Betty attracted wild bears to the location. Armed crew members guarded the perimeter as bears repeatedly wandered into camp.

When studio executives finally saw the footage shot on location, they deemed leading lady Evelyn Hartwell's performance unacceptable and replaced her. This forced von Thüngen to reshoot nearly all of "Yukon Fever" on the massive Stage 1 at Pickford-Fairbanks Studios. Snow-covered mountains were fashioned from timber, chicken wire, burlap, and plaster, then covered with tons of salt and flour. What critics praised as a realistic portrayal of the Yukon wilderness was fake.

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 25 | Drake's Law

Following the surprise success of the television series "Mr. Ed" (1961), broadcast executives rushed to develop talking-animal comedies of every imaginable variety. Among the most unusual was "Drake's Law" (1962), pitched at the first-ever television upfront presentation to gauge advertiser interest and secure early revenue commitments.

The pilot focuses on Sheriff Joshua Drake, the lawman of Tesora, Nevada, a small silver-mining town. After Drake is shot three times in the back by a mysterious assassin, his loyal deputy Abner Lovelace carries the sheriff's still-warm body to Black Elk, the local Lakota medicine man. Black Elk attempts an ancient ritual of transubstantiation to preserve Drake's soul by transferring it into the body of Drake's beloved white stallion, Ghost.

The ritual, however, misfires, placing Drake's mind in the body of a large white duck instead. Now Drake must solve his own murder while maintaining order in the rowdy mining town. Worst of all, Drake's girl Clara-Belle at Boots' Saloon will have to decide if she can love a duck. While the pilot was sold and thirty episodes of "Drake's Law" were produced, the series was canceled after only three episodes aired.

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 26 | Magic of the Old West (Instrumental)

"I just shot outdoors and stopped down."

—Freddie Young, Academy Award for Best Cinematography, "Lawrence of Arabia" (1962)

During the production of "The Silent Horizon" (1965), cinematographer Thomas McAllister quickly discovered that the vastness of the Bonneville Salt Flats required each shot to be precisely composed to provide geometry, shadow, and human scale. Otherwise, "everything would just look like an ocean of white."

Using Mitchell 65mm cameras configured for the Super Panavision 70 format, he frequently positioned human figures, horses, and wagons at the lower extreme of the frame, emphasizing the overwhelming scale of the salt flats, while horizon lines were deliberately set high or low to manipulate the viewer's sense of confinement and infinity.

McAllister even commissioned a specially modified telephoto lens to photograph riders emerging gradually from the heat haze. Heavy polarizing and graduated optical filters controlled the severe contrast created by the brilliant white salt, preserving deep blue skies without blowing out the highlights. Against this vast landscape, distant figures materialized almost imperceptibly along the horizon, seeming to dance ghost-like across the desert floor.

In 1995, USC's School of Cinema-Television held a 30th-anniversary screening of "The Silent Horizon" at the campus's state-of-the-art Norris Cinema Theatre. During the Q&A following the film, an aspiring young filmmaker asked McAllister if he had any practical advice for shooting a movie in a desert.

McAllister replied, "Drink plenty of water."

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 27 | Pretty Piece of Trouble

"What a costume designer does is a cross between magic and camouflage."

—Edith Head, eight-time Academy Award-winning costume designer

The climactic wedding in "Dakota Belle" (1952) required one of the most elaborate dresses ever created for a Hollywood Western. English costume designer Margaret Wetherby—never Maggie—spent nearly four months designing and crafting the gown, using more than fifty yards of silk faille for its fitted bodice, enormous circular skirt, intricate rosettes, and sweeping train.

Over eighty percent of the dress was meticulously sewn by hand. Its elaborate sleeves alone required a full day to drape and stitch, while cutting the fabric took more than fifteen hours and construction consumed nearly 300 hours. Although supposedly worn by a frontier bride in 1882, the dress's silhouette owed considerably more to the fashion of the 1950s.

Three weeks before the wedding sequence was scheduled to shoot, Wetherby learned that the film's twenty-six-year-old leading lady, Joanne Fairchild, was pregnant—and beginning to show. The bodice, tailored precisely to Fairchild's dainty figure, no longer fit. Wetherby took a new set of measurements and started over.

But there was a more pressing problem: Wetherby, a devout Anglican, objected to an unmarried pregnant actress appearing before the camera in a white wedding dress. Without consulting the director, she ordered the replacement gown to be made in pale peach. Fueled by coffee and

panic, Wetherby and her nine seamstresses worked around the clock to remake the gown in time for filming.

The change wasn't even noticed. Photographed in Technicolor, the peach registered on screen as an unusually warm ivory. Movie fan magazines across the country repeatedly praised Fairchild's "gorgeous white wedding gown" and "the bridal dress of your dreams."

The dress proved influential beyond Hollywood. Jacqueline Bouvier reportedly used Wetherby's gown as an inspiration for the wedding dress she commissioned for her marriage to the junior senator from Massachusetts the following year.

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 28 | Ride Every Canyon

"There's probably no stronger emotion than friendship between men."

—Howard Hawks, director of "El Dorado" (1966)

Close male friendship has always been central to the Western. Cowboys ride together, work together, and endure long stretches of hardship together. Few Westerns portray such male bonding more intensely than "Shane" (1953).

A mysterious drifter's arrival at Joe Starrett's ranch quickly develops into an intimate friendship between two men. They work side by side, defend one another. The drifter becomes part of the family yet never once covets Starrett's wife.

Classic Hollywood saw the drifter's behavior as chaste. Queer theorist Ellen Markham sees something more charged. In her essay "Riding Between the Lines: Queering the Western," Markham states that "Shane" can only be understood through the lens of same-sex desire.

The drifter introduces himself simply: "Call me Shane." Markham maintains that the phonetic similarity of "Shane" to "shame" is no coincidence. In the moral climate of 1950s America, his very name signals forbidden attraction and the shame that requires him to conceal it.

Markham further points to the lingering looks exchanged between Shane and Joe as evidence of their repressed homosexuality. Then there is the famous tree-stump sequence. Male bodies laboring in close proximity for hours; swinging axes; displays of masculine vigor. To Markham, these are all lascivious signifiers. As their movements become synchronized, their muscles strain and their breathing grows heavier. Even the stump itself symbolizes displaced homoerotic longings. The act of two men simultaneously "getting wood" cannot be ignored; it is a visual manifestation of thwarted lust.

Under the restrictions of Hays Code Hollywood, gay passion could only find expression through glances, gestures, and shared physical activity. But this censorship is exactly what makes

Shane and Joe Starrett's relationship so sexually charged. As Markham writes, "When you see those two men next to each other on screen, you can't help but imagine them moaning together."

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 29 | Steamboat Stomp (Instrumental)

"The best known names in the Territory of Nevada were those belonging to these long-tailed heroes of the revolver."

—Mark Twain, *Roughing It*

In his semi-autobiographical travelogue *Roughing It*, Mark Twain (Samuel L. Clemens) chronicled his adventures in California and the Nevada Territory, establishing himself as one of the keenest literary observers of the American West. According to Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer Ron Chernow, Twain essentially invented modern American celebrity culture, combining brilliant satire, relentless self-promotion, and his trademark white suit to become a global icon long before the age of mass media.

It is therefore no surprise that Mark Twain himself became a recurring character in countless American movies and television shows. The Twain seen onscreen often bore little resemblance to historical reality, however. As film historian Miles H. Sheridan pointed out, "Usually, when Hollywood sent Mark Twain out West, it sent the wrong Twain: white suit, white hair, cigar, and all. Nothing could be further from the truth. But celebrity sells."

Twain's strangest screen appearance may have been in "A Double-Barrelled Detective Story" (1952). Loosely adapted from Twain's 1902 novelette of the same name, the picture retained the wonderfully improbable premise of Sherlock Holmes traveling to the American West. The filmmakers took creative liberties and inserted Mark Twain into the story, sending him west with Holmes and recasting the author as the detective's reluctant American Watson.

The conceit was not entirely without precedent: Twain actually breaks the fourth wall and appears as himself in the original story. But the film expanded the joke into a full-fledged Twain-Holmes partnership, with the instantly recognizable humorist alternately assisting, irritating, and correcting the world's greatest detective. Proving once again that celebrity does sell.

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 30 | Their Saturday Villain

"I made a film where nobody got shot and nobody went to see it."

—Sam Peckinpah, on his rodeo movie "Junior Bonner" (1972)

While *Cinema Monthly* ranks "Dust of Champions" (1976) as the worst film of the 1970s and among the worst Westerns ever made, the rodeo footage in it is terrific. Unfortunately, whenever the cowboys stop riding, the movie falls apart.

Script supervisor Bonnie Sherwood pinpointed the problem: "Nobody could've made a coherent movie in our condition. We were all too high or too crazy."

The director was a drunk. The producer a womanizer. The production following a local rodeo circuit. The lead actor's stand-in was also the crew's drug dealer. Since cocaine was actually in the production budget, he was paid twice for a job where he literally stood around and did nothing. A gaffer attempted to jump a Harley-Davidson "picture vehicle" over a motel swimming pool after the boom operator bet him fifty dollars he couldn't make it. He couldn't. On another bet, three production assistants nearly got fired after "borrowing" two horses from the animal department and riding them through a local church during the Sunday service.

When a pig disappeared from a nearby ranch, catering served surprisingly excellent brisket three days running. Someone repeatedly put acid in the Jell-O salad at the craft services table. Nobody cared. A costume assistant bet her boss she could sleep with every member of the camera crew before principal photography wrapped. She almost won. The only holdout was the best boy grip, who was gay and hooking up with the assistant director. The married cinematographer was not.

Amazingly, "Dust of Champions" got made on time and under budget—in spite of the crew, not because of it. Assistant art director Jane Bately remembered the film fondly: "Some of the worst movies I ever worked on were also the most fun. This was both."

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 31 | Sousa Stomp (Instrumental)

Brass bands were a familiar sound in the American West. They were heard at cavalry posts, town parades, political rallies, and public celebrations. Not surprisingly, marching bands and military bands were also a fixture of the Hollywood Western, appearing in films such as "The Big Show" (1936), "The Horse Soldiers" (1959), and "The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance" (1962). Their stirring, patriotic tunes provided the soundtrack to Manifest Destiny.

Few Westerns used a military band more effectively than "Navajo Country" (1953). For its climactic cavalry procession, the production recruited the sixty-eight-member marching band of

West Texas Union Junior College and equipped the musicians with period-correct cornets, baritone horns, tubas, and helicons supplied by the studio music department.

Those instruments required another specialist: Sweet Herb Lewis, the film industry's preeminent brass polisher at the time. Sweet Herb moved to Studio City from the French Quarter in 1938 and was renowned for getting any brass instrument to "reflect like a mirror," even the most tarnished ones.

In a 1993 interview recorded for the Hollywood Oral History Project, Sweet Herb noted how Technicolor made his work especially important. On "Navajo Country," Sweet Herb remembered, "Those big helicons had to shine, shine, shine."

The production's New Mexico filming location made that challenging. Fine desert sand coated everything from lenses to trombones. Sweet Herb spent his days polishing and repolishing the same instruments to keep them glistening, pristine, and camera-ready.

Unfortunately, the racial attitudes of the Jim Crow South were also a problem. Tensions arose between members of the junior college marching band and Navajo background extras, Mexican caterers, and other nonwhite members of the cast and crew, including Sweet Herb Lewis.

"Them Texas college boys called me 'the Negro from New Orleans.' Though they didn't use that word, if you know what I mean," Sweet Herb told his interviewer years later. Then Sweet Herb Lewis chuckled. "They weren't too keen on a black man polishing their horns."

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 32 | Californians Now

The Bear Flag Revolt was a brief 1846 uprising centered in Sonoma, then the northern military headquarters of Mexican Alta California. There, a small group of American settlers seized the Mexican garrison and declared an independent California Republic that lasted just twenty-five days. But the revolt paved the way for the conquest of all of California by the United States and its eventual admission to the Union as the 31st state.

In his essay "John C. Frémont and the Bear Flag Revolution: A Reappraisal," historian John A. Hawgood observed that the Bear Flag Revolution continues to baffle historians and has been buried in a mass of mythology, making it one of the most contested episodes in California history.

Director Anthony Condor added to the lore of California's founding with his seminal Western "Bear Flag Flying" (1959), which presented a highly fictionalized, highly controversial, but ultimately highly entertaining account of the revolt.

Originally budgeted at \$8.75 million (1958 dollars), the budget for “Bear Flag Flying” ballooned to nearly \$18 million during its troubled production, already making it the most expensive Western ever. With cost overruns still mounting, Condor then broke one of Hollywood’s Golden Rules: never finance your own movie. He took out high-risk loans using his Malibu and Bel Air homes, fleet of exotic automobiles, and three yachts as collateral, and sank an additional \$3 million of his own money into the film.

By the time filming wrapped, nearly his entire personal fortune was riding on the picture’s success. Following its commercial and critical triumph, Condor flew the Bear Flag used in the production over his Bel Air estate until his death on December 24, 1977, at the age of 83.

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 33 | El Último Olé (Instrumental)

Cristóbal Murrieta’s debut film, “El Último Olé” (“The Last Olé,” 1994), grossed \$3.75 million at the domestic box office against an original production budget of under \$5,000, setting a record for the highest return on investment of any film released in the United States.

Shot in just five days in Guerrero, Coahuila, Mexico, using friends as crew members, Murrieta successfully blended the magical realism of Roberto Gavaldón’s “Macario” (1960) with Mexplotation cinema, also known at the time as narco-cinema.

Working with almost no money, Murrieta relied on borrowed equipment, homemade props, and whatever locations were readily available. Lacking a professional lighting package, the first-time director shot primarily outdoors during the day, favoring bright, oversaturated compositions. Murrieta turned the film’s financial limitations into an eccentric visual style all its own.

The film features a chupacabra-hunting matador, an ex-bandido turned blind street beggar whose *tlapitzalli* clay flute conceals a switchblade, and, improbably, go-go dancers. Murrieta fashioned a crude costume for the family goat to create the chupacabra, then shot it from various angles, allowing only fleeting glimpses of the monster and creating a surprisingly convincing cryptid. Murrieta cast his uncle as the matador, his blind grandfather as the ex-bandido, his older sister and her friends as the go-go dancers, and local residents as extras.

Unfortunately, Murrieta’s first film was also his last. Unbeknownst to the rest of his cast and crew save his family, he made “El Último Olé” while suffering from Stage IV pancreatic cancer. He died during the final weeks of post-production and never lived to see the film reach theaters. His uncle, meanwhile, moved to Hollywood and starred in more than 100 movies. For Cristóbal Murrieta, however, “El Último Olé” was truly his final hurrah.

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 34 | Ridin' to Hell's Gate

"I don't blame you for writing of me as you have. You had to believe other stories, but then I don't know as anyone would believe anything good of me anyway."

—Billy the Kid, to the Las Vegas Gazette (New Mexico), December 27, 1880

Billy the Kid remains the most enduring outlaw in motion picture history. In his essay "Silver Screen Desperado: Billy the Kid in the Movies," historian Paul Andrew Hutton observes that "more motion pictures have been made about Billy the Kid than any other figure in American, if not world, history."

Born Henry McCarty, Billy was still only fifteen or sixteen when he first ran afoul of the law in New Mexico. Slightly built and baby-faced, he reportedly looked even younger than his years. His cherubic appearance proved so central to his legend that some films cast women in the role of Billy to accentuate his boyish looks, emphasizing he was still more child than man.

His age and enigmatic persona made Billy a cinematic tabula rasa, an endlessly adaptable screen icon. Hollywood repeatedly reinvented Billy to reflect the changing cultural values of the day: a Robin Hood figure during the Great Depression in "Billy the Kid" (1930); an erotic outlaw in "The Outlaw" (1943); a neurotic Method rebel in "The Left Handed Gun" (1958); a reformed youth in "Billy the Kid vs. Dracula" (1966); a countercultural antihero in "Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid" (1973); and a charismatic rock star in "Young Guns" (1988). He may have died young, but Billy the Kid continues to live on.

As Bill S. Preston, Esq. says in "Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure" (1989) when Billy the Kid enters a saloon, "He's famous, dude."

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 35 | Sweet Lisa Jane

"The cameramen must make their heroines as the audience prefers them—young and beautiful, complete with smooth silken complexions."

—Leon Shamroy, Academy Award-winning cinematographer

Leon Shamroy acknowledged in the October 1947 issue of *American Cinematographer* that it was the cinematographer's job to make stars—specifically, highly paid leading ladies—appear more beautiful on screen than they did in everyday life. Although they were expected to inject realism into motion pictures, "the illusion must be preserved."

The best cinematographers of the Classic Hollywood era developed an arsenal of specialized techniques for preserving that illusion. They favored large, soft light sources close to the camera and carefully placed fill lights to soften facial shadows. Close-ups might receive entirely different lighting from the surrounding scene. Tiny eye lights created bright reflections in an actress's

pupils, drawing the audience's attention directly to her eyes. Some cameramen even smeared petroleum jelly on glass plates placed in front of the lens, selectively softening the face while leaving the eyes sharp.

Cinematographer Radek Vozihnoj applied many of those principles in Sam Korvin's "All Tomorrow Brings" (1959) while filming in CinemaScope on Mitchell BNC 35mm cameras with Bausch & Lomb anamorphic lenses and Eastman Color Negative 5250. He reserved his heaviest diffusion for close-ups of veteran actress Hattie Vale. By combining softened key light, delicate filtration, and Mole-Richardson backlights, Vozihnoj gave Vale luminous skin and lustrous hair, making her appear ten years younger.

As Vozihnoj rapturously explained, "The camera is a beauty-making machine. It is Hollywood's greatest seducer."

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 36 | A Mermaid's Tale (Instrumental)

In the early 1950s, Hollywood rushed to introduce widescreen formats to combat the rising popularity of television. First came the 1.85:1 aspect ratio, perfectly suited to capturing the sweeping landscapes and endless horizons of the traditional Western.

As Westerns grew in scope and scale, movie screens expanded alongside them. CinemaScope widened the image to 2.55:1. Panavision introduced 2.35:1 anamorphic 35mm, followed by the 2.20:1 Super Panavision 70 and the 2.76:1 Ultra Panavision 70. Cinerama went further still. It used three interlocking projectors to cast side-by-side images onto an enormous, deeply curved screen, creating a panoramic triptych effect at a 2.59:1 aspect ratio.

Supervistarama took the widescreen race to its most audacious extreme. Their widescreen was 175 feet wide—double that of the Cinerama Dome. Their proprietary 3.75:1 film projection process used four synchronized 35mm projectors, not three. The idea was to totally immerse audiences inside a movie.

To launch the format, its developers built the 1,021-seat, \$1.5 million Supervistarama Auditorium in Burbank as the Supervistarama flagship theater. It opened with the world premiere of the sprawling Western comedy "Go West, West, West Old Man" on Friday, August 13, 1965.

The date proved unlucky. The premiere coincided with the third day of the Watts riots; local news outlets devoted no coverage to Hollywood's latest prestige movie palace.

Supervistarama never recovered. Within two years, the auditorium abandoned four-projector presentations altogether for conventional 35mm and 70mm film prints.

Its final attraction was the Western musical “Paint Your Wagon” (1969). Shortly after the film’s run, the Supervistarama Auditorium closed for good. The format died with it.

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 37 | Cowboy Yodel Song

The Great Texas-Swiss Fever of 1888 was a brief but remarkable cultural craze sparked by the arrival of Heinrich Zimmermann in Houston, Texas. A traveling performer from Switzerland carrying little more than an alphorn nearly as tall as himself, Zimmermann gave a simple musical performance outside the Rice Hotel. Word of the “Swiss man with the magic horn” spread across Texas by telegraph, and within weeks Zimmermann was playing to packed audiences in Dallas, San Antonio, and Austin.

Soon, the entire state became enamored with all things Swiss. Music schools offered yodeling lessons, merchants imported wheels of pungent Swiss cheese, and Texans inexplicably began wearing heavy lederhosen and dirndls beneath the summer sun. A Baptist church in Waco even became regionally famous for performing “Amazing Grace” in four-part yodel harmony.

Many decades later, Zimmermann’s grandson, independent filmmaker Rolf Walder, devoted much of the 1950s to directing a series of low-budget films immortalizing the Great Texas-Swiss Fever of 1888. Shot around San Antonio, Walder’s pictures combined traditional Western plots with Swiss yodeling, lederhosen, feathered Alpine hats, and increasingly elaborate recreations of his grandfather’s adventures. Their cult success—collectively the films became known as “Walder’s Yodelers”—made Walder a leading figure in San Antonio’s burgeoning film production community and eventually sparked a bidding war among the Big Five Hollywood studios for his talents.

Walder eventually signed a lucrative three-picture deal with RKO Pictures, legendary for popularizing the Hollywood musical genre. Operating with a studio budget for the first time in his career, Walder could finally realize his lifelong passion project, “The Texas Line” (1957), an extravagant widescreen Technicolor Western built around the musical tradition that had made him and his grandfather famous.

Unfortunately, “The Texas Line” underperformed at the box office. Walder’s career never recovered. Nor did RKO.

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 38 | Bandit Boogie Woogie (Instrumental)

“The interest in silent films is going to die out pretty soon... unless something comes along to generate a new enthusiasm.”

—Preeminent film preservationist David Shepard, 2012

More than a century after the Silent Movie Era, artificial intelligence has opened new possibilities for preserving early cinema. By combining high-resolution film scanning, digital image reconstruction, frame interpolation, scratch removal, and machine-learning restoration, archivists can now stabilize the damaged and volatile nitrate footage of old movies to rescue photoplays previously thought beyond repair.

Using these cutting-edge technological advances, a collection of long-forgotten “Bandit Ballads” has finally been digitally restored. Originally produced by Ned Rustler Studios, these two-reel shorts extolling the joys and hijinks of bank robbers in the Old West were once lost to history.

Working from deteriorated negatives, surviving production notes and stills, and original continuity records, restoration artists employed neural image reconstruction, motion interpolation, A.I.-assisted frame synthesis, and pixel tracking to resurrect a forgotten film subgenre. Processing it all were restoration workstations equipped with 48-gigabyte graphics processors, 128 gigabytes of system memory, and two 90-terabyte ThunderBay RAID arrays, restoring, frame by frame, portions of the films ruined by a century of decay and neglect.

When entire scenes were missing, actors in period costume recreated them on a green-screen stage. A.I. then digitally mapped the faces and likenesses of the original cast onto the new performances, while existing footage and production stills were used to generate the appropriate backgrounds, which were subsequently composited into the scenes.

The astonishing results bring the past to life, allowing modern audiences to experience the Bandit Ballads as vibrant entertainment for the first time.

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 39 | The Bodacious Ranch

Looking to capitalize on the success of network television hits like “The Beverly Hillbillies” (1962–71), “Green Acres” (1965–71), and “Petticoat Junction” (1963–70), Film-Lux Television produced and distributed “The Bodacious Ranch” (1966–67) through first-run syndication.

The tawdry, lascivious sitcom—which combined America’s growing fascination with rural comedy and sexy, buxom women—proved to be an easy sell to local television stations around the country. It found an especially receptive home on mid-market independent and UHF stations, where its producers could offer a racier variation on the rural sitcom than ABC, CBS, or NBC were willing to broadcast. Its schedule varied wildly from city to city: viewers in Spokane might catch it on Saturday night at 10:30 p.m., while audiences in Dayton watched the same episode Wednesday afternoon at 3:00 p.m.

Loosely adapted from an article published in the January 1964 issue of *Rogue: Designed for Men* magazine, which operated as an alternative to *Playboy* magazine, the series is set at the

Bodacious Ranch, a popular brothel located somewhere in rural New Mexico. It is the place where you can “wink your cares away.” Farmers, cowboys, and local politicians come to eat, drink, and socialize, but mostly to leer at the ranch’s collection of scantily-clad guitar-playing young women...and men.

Like the other rural sitcoms of its time, very little actually happened during an episode of “The Bodacious Ranch.” A traveling salesman might arrive, a performer might threaten a move to the Big City, or the sheriff might inspect the brothel on the pretext that it is violating some obscure town ordinance when actually all he wants is a liaison with one of the young ladies working there. And a different one each week, at that. By the end of every episode, the crisis has passed, the girls are back performing, the sheriff is satisfied no violations have been found, and the Bodacious Ranch is the same as it was twenty-three minutes earlier.

It was the epitome of repetitive, mindless viewing. Exactly what Beverle Houston—one of the first and foremost American film and television scholars—would later describe in her influential essay “Viewing Television: The Metapsychology of Endless Consumption” as an endless cycle of desire and consumerism in which satisfaction is continually promised but never quite achieved. Thus, “The Bodacious Ranch” was quintessentially American.

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 40 | War Drums

Native American philosopher and poet Elizabeth Keene-Owens emphasizes in her groundbreaking book *Making Red Men White* that “American Indians are the only people who get to watch their genocide play out as entertainment.”

Between 1940 and 1950 alone, more than 650 Westerns were produced in Hollywood, many depicting the conquest of Native Americans as an inevitable and even heroic chapter in the settling of the American frontier.

The familiar “cavalry and Indians” picture reduced that history to a remarkably simple dramatic formula: Indians attacked. Bugles sounded. The cavalry arrived. Indians died.

According to Keene-Owens, the pounding war drums that accompanied the Indian attacks in these motion pictures served an especially insidious purpose: “The drums told white audiences not simply that Indians were coming, but how they were supposed to feel about Indians when they arrived: scared.”

Native American music in these films was less an expression of culture than a cinematic warning signal, “a clarion call for fear,” transforming an entire people into an apocalyptic threat. Ironically, it was always the white people who were being threatened with extermination. Classic Hollywood’s war cries and ceremonial songs were almost never authentic. Movies created their own fictional Indian sounds, instantly recognizable to audiences but belonging to

no actual tribe. Composers and sound departments manufactured this imagined soundscape from pounding drums, repetitive rhythms, whoops, cries, and pseudo-Native vocalizations performed by European Americans. Of course, their chants were little more than rhythmic gibberish.

By the 1950s, however, Hollywood's depiction of Native Americans began a gradual and sometimes awkward transformation. So-called "pro-Indian" Westerns such as "Broken Arrow" (1950) and "Apache" (1954) attempted more sympathetic portrayals, while "The Searchers" (1956) confronted the racial hatred underlying the traditional Western with considerably greater complexity.

Yet although the Indian sometimes changed from villain to victim, Keene-Owens argued, Hollywood continued to tell Native American history primarily through "white man eyes." Even "Dances with Wolves" (1990), celebrated for its empathetic Lakota Sioux characters and extensive use of the Lakota language with English subtitles, ultimately asks audiences to enter the Lakota Sioux world through a white man's experience of discovering it.

The war drums may have grown quieter over time, but they never stopped pounding.

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 41 | Midnight Rider

In 1956, at the height of San Francisco's Beat movement, experimental filmmaker Ian Frisk completed his nine-minute avant-garde movie "A Film" while studying at City College. Frisk surreptitiously shot 16mm footage of a local Dixieland jazz band performing in a North Beach bar and intercut it with discarded fragments and reels of Hollywood B-Westerns he found at swap meets and estate sales.

Frisk also edited in what he called "film junk"—countdown leaders, cue marks, light leaks, and other material scrapped by traditional filmmakers. He additionally manipulated film strips with steel wool and solvents, even dragging them across the floor to accumulate dust and scratches.

Working without synchronized sound, Frisk assembled "A Film" while a loud television played in the background, timing his cuts to whatever happened to be airing that night. In the early days of San Francisco television, this often meant live concerts by ensembles such as the Little Symphony of San Francisco. Frisk said his low-tech method of post-production "introduced an element of beautiful accident into my editing."

One evening, when Frisk was previewing the chaotic climax of "A Film," the local educational television station KQED began broadcasting a live in-studio orchestra performance of *Boléro* by Maurice Ravel. Frisk knew right away that he had found his soundtrack. Combining cowboys, gunfights, galloping horses, and a Dixieland jazz band with Ravel was a bold artistic choice too good to ignore.

Originally overlooked, “A Film” is now recognized by academics and art historians as one of the most important experimental films of the twentieth century. Frisk’s juxtaposition of dramatic classical music, flea-market footage, and film junk, paired with rapid cutting and Sergei Eisenstein’s principles of dialectical montage, created a new filmic language that everyone takes for granted today. Following the launch of MTV in 1981, more discerning critics began proclaiming Frisk the real father of the modern music video.

Sadly, “A Film” has been impossible to watch for decades. Frisk tightly controlled access to his films during his lifetime, and following his death in 2011, his estate has refused to make them available for public viewing. Therefore, generations of filmmakers have used the visual grammar invented by a man they’ve probably never heard of for a film they’ve never seen and most likely don’t even know exists.

At his final retrospective, Frisk was asked what had inspired his revolutionary masterpiece. He simply replied, “I liked Westerns.”

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 42 | Beyond the Lake

By 1957, Howard “Bud” Ward had already directed 121 films, most of them Westerns. He preferred to shoot his Westerns near Moab, Utah, because “I know the land out there and it knows me.”

Recording location sound on a major Western during the classical Hollywood period was always a massive endeavor. When Ward returned to Moab for the seventh time to film “The Lost and the Lonely” (1957), he used an eight-man sound crew, including a mixer, recordist, two boom operators, a cable man, and three radiomen. Dialogue was captured with RCA 77-D ribbon microphones and fed through hundreds of feet of cable to an RCA PM64A synchronous magnetic recorder-reproducer housed in a sound truck. Heavy windscreens protected the microphones, although persistent desert winds frequently overwhelmed otherwise usable dialogue.

While much of the dialogue ultimately had to be re-recorded in post-production, Ward believed that a truly convincing performance could never be created on a Hollywood soundstage. Actors had to be filmed on location. Wind, dust, and blinding sunlight changed how actors behaved, reacted, and squinted. To Ward, those realities could not be faked.

To complicate matters, Ward shot “The Lost and the Lonely” in VistaVision. The horizontal-feed 35mm Mitchell cameras required for VistaVision produced exceptionally sharp and detailed images but were so noisy that massive acoustic blimps had to be placed around them to keep the more sensitive microphones from picking up the distinctive whirring sound.

At the end of each shooting day in Moab, Ward gathered the entire cast and crew into what he called his “prayer circle.” His personal bagpiper then played traditional folk songs, hymns, dirges, and ditties for them as the sun set. Ward believed this daily ritual created the communal bond necessary to complete a picture under difficult conditions. By Ward’s fiat, these performances were never recorded. They were too sacred.

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 43 | Porko Loco Polka (Instrumental)

According to animation historian Roger Chapman, the Warner Bros. “Looney Tunes” cartoons mirrored the logic of diplomat George Kennan’s Cold War policy of containment. They presented conflicts where aggression needed to be confronted but unnecessary escalation should be carefully avoided. As animator Chuck Jones himself explained, Bugs Bunny never starts fights but sometimes has to finish them, thus making Bugs an unlikely embodiment of Cold War restraint.

Not surprisingly, the CIA took a keen interest in using animation for Cold War propaganda. For example, it covertly financed the 1954 animated adaptation of George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, allowing the Agency to change the fable’s ending to deliver an explicitly anti-Soviet message.

Likewise, during the 1960s, the CIA secretly financed hundreds of animated shorts produced in Hollywood, using a network of cutouts and intermediary organizations to skirt U.S. law. In what was known as Operation Roper, Agency money passed through Castle Bank & Trust in Nassau, Bahamas, and other offshore financial institutions before being transferred to shell companies registered in Wilmington, Delaware; Reno, Nevada; and Casper, Wyoming, and finally reaching Gordon-Rosso Studios in Studio City, California.

Gordon-Rosso’s enormously popular cartoons featured anthropomorphized animals inhabiting a comic version of the American West. Beneath the slapstick, however, was a consistent capitalist message: prosperity followed individual initiative, private ownership, and a free marketplace, while collective schemes and government control of production invariably produced shortages, laziness, and disaster.

But to millions of American children, the Gordon-Rosso shorts were simply funny cartoons about talking animals in cowboy hats.

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 44 | Where the Wild Winds Blew

“A camera can show a man leaving his house. The right music can make you happy he is leaving and sad he is leaving at the same time. The composer’s challenge is finding that music. That is the trick.”

—Edwin Buchheim, multiple-award-winning film composer

Long considered one of the greatest film scores ever composed, Edwin Buchheim’s music for the three-hour epic “Westward to Home” (1964) was composed and recorded in just 13 days, his “lucky number.”

In addition to being classical Hollywood’s premier composer, Buchheim headed the music department at United Studios for over three decades. There, he exercised near-total control over the studio’s ensemble of virtuoso musicians recruited from around the world. His most famous innovation—suspending microphones from the rafters to record groups of instruments together rather than individual performances—was initially mocked. Entire sessions were devoted to moving microphones by only a few feet or even a few inches to get the sound “just right.” Buchheim would yell at his often-flummoxed orchestra, “We are not recording 96 musicians. We are recording one orchestra!”

During scoring sessions, precision was absolute. The picture-locked film was projected onto a massive screen behind Buchheim as he flamboyantly conducted “his darlings.” Every musical phrase had to conform to an actor’s movement, a spoken line, or even a subtle gaze while still sounding spontaneous. “You have to know where the music is going and where the picture is going,” Buchheim would bellow. “They are not always going to the same place, but you must. Rewind! Again!”

For one musical cue in “Westward to Home,” Buchheim even brought a circus horse onto the scoring stage, insisting that its hoofbeats become part of his orchestra. Its trainer led Blue Misty around a wooden platform while Buchheim waved his baton, adjusting Blue Misty’s tempo until her prancing hoofbeats fell into rhythm with the music.

The resulting score was simultaneously hopeful, heroic, beautiful, and terribly sad. In a word, a masterpiece. Upon the film’s release, Buchheim’s music was so distinctive and immediately identifiable that he became bigger than the stars on screen.

United Studios later renamed its massive recording stage the Edwin Buchheim Scoring Stage. But everyone at United still affectionately calls it “Stage 13.”

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 45 | Dance of Death (Instrumental)

In his essay “Gothic Eurowesterns: A Grotesque Perspective on a Hollywood Myth,” scholar Evert Jan van Leeuwen describes how filmmakers fused the Western with Gothic traditions of ghosts, supernatural vengeance, and psychological terror, creating films that could “move from the satiric to the monstrous.”

Low-budget Mexploitation horror Westerns, known as *churros* in Mexico, have historically undergone similar monstrous transformations, although for purely commercial reasons. “El grito de la muerte” (The Scream of Death, 1959) became “The Living Coffin”; “Caballo galopante de la muerte” (Galloping Horse of Death, 1958) became “The Headless Horse”; “Botín de sangre y huesos” (Loot of Blood and Bones, 1965) became “Skull Rider”; and “Tierra de arena y Satanás” (Land of Sand and Satan, 1959) became “Hangman’s Swamp.”

Filmic butcherings were common when these films crossed the border, with distributors such as former carnival worker K. Gordon Murray retitling, dubbing, and recutting them for audiences in the United States and Canada.

The altered films were primarily screened at drive-ins, local movie houses, and on late-night television. No box office figures or Nielsen ratings exist. However, independent television stations repeatedly broadcast the Americanized *churros* for more than three decades, evidence of their enduring popularity.

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 46 | Bury My Meat

“Knowledge does not enrich us; it removes us more and more from the mythic world in which we were once at home by right of birth.”

—Carl Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*

Veteran director Lyndon Sharpe chose Sedona, Arizona, as the setting for his now-classic Western “Under the Blood Moon” (1962). The region had been a popular Hollywood filming location going all the way back to Victor Fleming’s silent-film “Call of the Canyon” (1923). But Sharpe was interested in more than just Sedona’s spectacular landscapes.

An early devotee of Jungian analysis, the aging Sharpe was determined to prove that he and the Hollywood Western could remain relevant in an era increasingly dominated by European art cinema and the French New Wave. Sharpe was particularly taken with Carl Jung’s writings about the Pueblo tribes of the Southwest and the spiritual significance Indigenous peoples attached to the land.

The ancient Sinagua dwellings near Sedona represented a physical gateway to the lost mythic consciousness explained in Jung’s writings, so Sharpe thought. After experimenting one

evening with datura, a powerful deliriant plant native to the area, Sharpe experienced what he later described simply as his “sacred vision.”

He abruptly rewrote much of his movie and added an elaborate dance-dream sequence based on his vision. Sharpe knew there was only one choreographer who could realize this vision on screen: Czechoslovakian dance master Marek Vondráček. Visa problems kept the Europe-based Vondráček from reaching Arizona for three months, further delaying an already troubled production plagued by unseasonable rains, labor disputes, and a measles outbreak.

Completed too late for the official Cannes program in 1962, “Under the Blood Moon” instead screened at the Marché du Film (Film Market), where it received a standing ovation. Though only a small audience attended the initial screening, the picture quickly became the talk of Cannes that year. Jean-Luc Godard reportedly declared, “As cinema, it is beyond beautiful. It is sublime. In a just world, it should win the Palme d’Or, but we do not live in a just world.”

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 47 | Fire Fiddle (Instrumental)

“I work standing up...editing is a kind of dance—the finished film is a kind of crystallized dance—and when have you ever seen a dancer sitting down to dance?”

—Walter Murch, Academy Award-winning editor

Prior to computerized editing, films were cut on editing machines like Moviola, KEM, and Steenbeck that used actual, physical film. Starting in 1984, however, early nonlinear editing systems such as Lucasfilm’s EditDroid and the Montage Picture Processor began competing with the traditional platforms. The new systems, which relied on cumbersome synchronized laserdisc players to edit, were seen at the time as a giant leap forward.

The real seismic shift came in 1989, though, when Avid Media Composer revolutionized the post-production process. Using digitized images stored on external hard drives, Media Composer integrated easily into decades-old editorial workflows. Avid quickly became the industry standard, offering a degree of flexibility that would have been nearly impossible with earlier NLEs or conventional film editing.

But the more technology advanced, the more it also stayed the same. Walter Murch explains in his legendary book *In the Blink of an Eye: A Perspective on Film Editing* how editing on an upright Moviola editing machine with an assistant editor involves essentially the same random-access process as editing on a computer. “The Avid is faster at it than the Moviola,” Murch notes. “But the process is the same.”

“Unbeguiled” (1993) is widely regarded as the first major studio Western fully edited using Avid Media Composer. The film’s complicated, nonchronological storylines and the rapid pace of its climactic shootout made the system an indispensable tool.

Yet the expectation that a state-of-the-art digital nonlinear editing system would speed up the completion of the film proved misguided. Greater flexibility simply created more possibilities, more decisions, and more deadlines. The producers of “Unbeguiled” famously experimented with 147 different endings to the movie. Ultimately, they returned to the ending that was originally scripted.

The paradox was summed up best by the film’s editor, Bruce Gregory: “An optical dissolve used to take 24 to 48 hours to process at a lab. Now it took five days just to figure out how long a damn dissolve should be.”

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 48 | The Graveyard Calls

“From the beginning, writing meant freedom, the spreading of wings.”

—Arthur Miller, Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright

For over a decade, Alfred Walker prospered writing screenplays within the Hollywood studio system. Like many contract screenwriters, Walker considered himself a hack. But a well-paid hack. By the age of 35, he was earning as much as \$85,000 for a screenplay he could knock out in only two weeks.

Then his name came to the attention of HUAC. In October 1947, Walker was called to testify before Congress. He refused to name names and was blacklisted by Hollywood.

While many of his blacklisted colleagues moved to Europe to continue working, Walker remained in Los Angeles. King Brothers Productions soon approached him through an intermediary and offered Walker \$2,500 to secretly write a low-budget B-Western. He jumped at the chance. More assignments followed. During the next three years, Walker wrote more than forty screenplays under assumed names or through “fronts” who received credit for his work. Even though he would insert political subtexts into the “shoot-’em-ups,” all the screenplays were “trash” by his standards.

Throughout, Walker’s wife D’Lu—his harshest critic and fiercest defender—stood by him. “My courage was demonstrated by trying to write human truths in the face of madness,” Walker later said. “Her courage was demonstrated by enduring my absences in silence.”

Over Memorial Day weekend in 1950, Walker went alone to the mountain town of Big Bear Lake. Locking himself in a secluded cabin for three days, he wrote his most personal screenplay, “a reflection of my life at the time, an allegory laying bare the cowardice and hypocrisy of the industry I once so loved.”

Thus, “Mourning at Midnight” (1951) was born. A brutal and honest Western loosely based on a Nikolai Kirov short story, the film is now regarded as one of the most subversive American movies ever made.

When D’Lu first read the script, though, her reaction was silence. Finally, Walker asked her whether she liked it or not. D’Lu replied, “My God, it’s so sad.”

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 49 | Left to Die Here All Alone

“The biker films of the 1960s and 1970s displaced the Western without abandoning its central fantasies: the horse became a motorcycle, the open trail became a lone highway, and the outlaw traded his six-shooter for leather, chrome, and gasoline. As Misao Dean observes in her *International Journal of Motorcycle Studies* essay, both the biker and the Western hero are associated with ‘mobility, independence, freedom, and a personal ethos that sets them apart from mainstream society.’ For women, the transformation was considerably more provocative. ‘The Mini-Skirt Mob’ (1968) and ‘She-Devils on Wheels’ (1968) put women astride the machines and, just as importantly, in command of the gang, appropriating the mobility, violence, sexual aggression, and contempt for domestic respectability traditionally reserved for male Western outlaws. ‘The Girl on a Motorcycle’ (1968) made the equation between motorcycle and sexual liberation even more explicit, wrapping its heroine in black leather as she abandons her husband and takes to the road in pursuit of her lover. By ‘Angels’ Wild Women’ (1972), female bikers could drink, fight, fornicate, and seek revenge with the same gleeful amorality previously assigned to men. The female biker thus became a distinctly modern variation on the Western antihero: sexually available yet socially uncontrollable, simultaneously marketed as an erotic spectacle and permitted to seize the freedom traditionally promised by the Wild West.”

—Tiffany Reynolds, professor of Cinematic Arts and American Studies,
Chrome Horses: Chicks, Bikes, and the Displaced Western

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 50 | Tombstone Hustle (Instrumental)

“In Western movies, you would normally hear a horse running and it would have a three-beat pattern. This is not actually what a horse would sound like.”

—John Roesch, former head Foley artist at Lucasfilm’s Skywalker Sound

Foley—the in-studio act of performing footsteps and other everyday sounds in synchronization with filmed action—was still a relatively young craft in the 1950s. Named after sound effects pioneer Jack Foley, who began developing the technique during the transition to talking pictures, the work required performers with an exceptional sense of timing and movement.

Few were better suited to Foley work than Lydia Belitskaya, a Bolshoi Ballet dancer who defected to the West during a 1954 European tour. After arriving in Hollywood, Belitskaya abandoned ballet for Foley and became one of the industry's most sought-after practitioners. A devoted fan of Westerns, she worked almost exclusively in the genre, Foley-ing everything from cowboy footsteps and fistfights to carnal relations and galloping horses.

She was named Foley Artist of the Year five years running from 1956 to 1960. She then picked up three further awards in the mid-1960s and won again in 1979, making her the only nine-time recipient of the coveted FAOTY. Over her four-decade career, the former Soviet ballerina helped create the sounds of the American West in more than 450 films and television episodes.

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 51 | Frosty Air Delights

In his book *Christmas Cheer: Sex, Spectacle, and Christian Conformity in the Holiday Western Musical*, film historian Gilbert Laxton examines Hollywood's curious cycle of Christmas Western musicals during the 1950s and 1960s. For its December 1996 issue, *Cinema Monthly* contributing editor Tessa Zimmerman interviewed Laxton about sex, religion, and the enduring appeal of his favorite movie, "Warm My Hearth Tonight" (1962). The following interview has been lightly edited for clarity:

TESSA ZIMMERMAN: You argue that these musicals were more provocative than their wholesome reputations suggest. Can you elaborate?

GILBERT LAXTON: They were sold as family-friendly Christmas fare, yet Hollywood filled the screen with exuberant heterosexual eroticism and homosexual subtext. Shapely cowgirls, muscular cowboys, skin-tight costumes, exposed high-kicking legs, flirtatious songs, and salacious choreography.

ZIMMERMAN: How did filmmakers get away with it?

LAXTON: In a word, spectacle. Spectacle made the movies playful and safe. My grandmother and all her friends loved Liberace, the gayest man in America. Why? Because he was entertaining. They didn't care a hoot about his private life. In the Western Christmas musicals, sexual desire was packaged in catchy melodies. In comic courtship. In the reassuring conventions of holiday merriment. Even jokes about multiple wives and promiscuous morality made it past the censors because they were mundane on the surface but delightfully suggestive beneath.

ZIMMERMAN: You also write about the moral panic these films caused in some Christian communities.

LAXTON: Absolutely. There was a feeling that Hollywood was making Christmas too risqué. Church groups complained, ministers preached against the films, and local theater owners occasionally faced protests. Obviously, that backfired. Audiences kept buying tickets. The box-office numbers were hard to argue with. The protests against sexy Christmas musicals were actually just free marketing. The studios loved it. So much so, sometimes they manufactured their own fake protests to goose publicity.

ZIMMERMAN: So sex sells, even when Santa is watching?

LAXTON: Especially when Santa is watching! The studios discovered that a little sacrilege could be very profitable, provided everything was safely restored by Christmas morning. In every movie, marriage prevailed. Faith survived. There was always one traditional carol. And everybody went home humming happy songs.

ZIMMERMAN: Why wasn't that formula transferred to other genres?

LAXTON: The Holy Trinity.

ZIMMERMAN: Care to explain?

LAXTON: The Western provided the idealized national mythology, Christmas supplied the religion, and the musical served us the sex.

ZIMMERMAN: And where does "Warm My Hearth Tonight" fit into this? Why is that your favorite movie?

LAXTON: It brilliantly shows the contradiction. The text and the subtext. No other film does that better. Beneath the artificial snow and holiday cheer, "Warm My Hearth Tonight" offered audiences a fantasy rich in erotic pleasure but with enough social conformity for the two to coexist. Naughty enough to be titillating, nice enough to be American.

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 52 | Dusty the Magic Snow Cowboy

Beginning with "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" (1964), New York City-based Rankin/Bass Productions defined the Christmas television special for generations of viewers. Even though they outsourced the production of their actual animation to Japan, the distinctive Rankin/Bass stop-motion style has become inseparable from the holidays themselves.

In the mid-1960s, rival animation studio Perry Gerber Moving Pictures produced a run of similar stop-motion holiday specials centered on Western-themed characters, including top-tier classics such as "Dusty the Magic Snow Cowboy" (1966), "'Twas the Santa Claus Western Roundup" (1969), and "The Little Cowboy Christmas" (1970).

Working from a small production facility in Mill Valley, California, Gerber proudly advertised its animation as “Made in America.” The company employed a small but dedicated team of puppeteers and “magic-teers,” as Gerber called them.

After hiring an eccentric inventor and tinkerer cryptically known as “just George,” they developed their own proprietary stop-motion process called Mousetrap Motion™, named after the company cat, Mousetrap. Combining traditional frame-by-frame puppet animation with miniature animatronics, the process allowed tiny motors hidden inside the figures to blink and shift their eyes. For broader action, mechanical controls moved the puppets ever-so-slightly along their intended path during each camera exposure, creating a natural micro-blur that softened the characteristic staccato quality of conventional stop motion.

Articulated metal armatures and interchangeable heads and facial features allowed for endless combinations of movements and expressions; guide wires helped characters leap, bounce, dance, and fly. The puppets were also fitted with heavily varnished plastic eyes that caught the filming lights like the eyes of live actors, giving their faces an unusual sense of life.

The painstaking process gave every Perry Gerber production a handmade quality unlike anything else on television.

Perry Gerber Moving Pictures shuttered unexpectedly in 1975. While this was most likely due to increasing domestic production costs, its final press release simply noted, “It is with great sadness that we inform you our in-studio cat has passed away. Without her, there can be no more magic.”

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 53 | O Blessed Morn

In *Beets, Beaver, and Apple Pie: A History of Christmas Meals in Hollywood Westerns*, food historian Caroline Davis takes the reader on an unexpectedly appetizing journey through Christmas Day cuisine as presented in the Hollywood Western. Davis delights in the details, but her larger point is that in films such as “White Ribbon Silver Star” (1942) and “The Three Outlaws” (1948), the Christmas meal represents a rare break from the hardships of Western life and “is a respite full of abundance, stability, and communal pleasure.”

Davis also examines the curious ways movies and literature have shaped what we eat at Christmas. Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* helped establish turkey as the traditional Christmas meal in Britain. A century later, the classic Western “The Faithful and the Forgotten” (1946) played a similar role in popularizing apple pie as an American Christmas tradition. The film’s sprawling Christmas feast concludes with a homemade apple pie, a scene Davis credits with helping cement both the dessert’s place at the center of the American Christmas table and the postwar popularity of the expression “as American as apple pie.”

Among Davis's discoveries in surviving production notes for "The Faithful and the Forgotten" was the recipe used to make the apple pie seen onscreen; the recipe itself is from 1845.

APPLE PIE — 1845

Ingredients

Pastry for a double-crust pie
6–8 tart apples, peeled and thinly sliced
¼ cup molasses
⅓ cup white sugar
Grated lemon peel or nutmeg, to taste
1 tablespoon butter, cut into small pieces

Directions

1. Line a pie plate with the bottom crust and fill generously with the sliced apples.
2. Pour the molasses over the apples and sprinkle with sugar.
3. Add grated lemon peel or nutmeg and dot with butter.
4. Cover with the top crust, seal the edges, and cut a vent in the center.
5. Bake until the crust is golden and the apples are tender.*
6. Allow to cool before serving.

*For a modern oven, bake at 350°F and begin checking after 45 minutes.

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 54 | Filly Four Step (Instrumental)

The Fieffer Whinny is one of the most distinctive sounds in motion-picture history. It was first recorded for "Apache Hunter" (1948), when the film's sound crew needed a particularly expressive reaction from Sugarloaf, one of the horses used during production. Six different whinnies were reportedly recorded during the session, but one proved unusually emotive and was subsequently transferred to the studio's permanent sound-effects library.

Sound effects editor Harold Metz labeled the recording "Fieffer Whinny" in memory of his friend Eddie Fieffer, who had been killed three years earlier during the Battle of Okinawa. As sound effects editors routinely copied and shared recordings between studio libraries, Sugarloaf's whinny spread quickly throughout Hollywood, appearing in hundreds and hundreds of other Westerns. Eventually it escaped its original genre altogether. By altering its pitch, speed, timbre, and other qualities, sound editors discovered that the familiar horse call could become something else entirely. Variations of Sugarloaf's voice have since been used as the vocalization for everything from dinosaurs to robots to space aliens.

The original Fieffer Whinny remains in use to this day. Film-sound historians note that Sugarloaf, heard in thousands of movies and television programs without screen credit, is technically the most prolific performer in Hollywood history.

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 55 | Swine Lake (Instrumental)

“There were these bulls coming in. Just ahead of them was the crowd, and some chap tripped and brought the whole lot of them down.”

—Mike Campbell, in Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises*

Mel Brooks’ “Blazing Saddles” (1974) was a box-office phenomenon. Produced for \$2.6 million, the Western parody grossed nearly \$120 million worldwide. It was the year’s biggest commercial success and inspired a wave of comedy Westerns as studios searched for new ways to extract every last dollar from what was actually a dying genre.

One of the strangest offshoots was the short-lived “running with the pigs” Westerns, inspired by Pamplona’s centuries-old Running of the Bulls. Nearly fifty years earlier, Ernest Hemingway had introduced generations of Americans to the Festival of San Fermín in *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), romanticizing its mixture of danger, drinking, and bravado. Hollywood replaced Hemingway’s bulls with stampeding pigs and transplanted Pamplona to the Old West.

In films such as “Loose Nooses” (1975), “Cowpoke Crazy” (1976), and “The Boise Kid” (1977), drunken cowboys tried to prove their courage by racing through Western towns pursued by herds of swine. The film fad disappeared almost as quickly as it began. Each new release brought diminishing box-office returns—a clear sign that Westerns really were nearing their end. Michael Cimino’s disastrous “Heaven’s Gate” (1980) provided what was thought to be the final nail in the Western coffin, convincing Hollywood studios the genre was no longer financially viable. It would be another decade before a Western dominated the box office again.

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 56 | Mama Got Shot Down

“If you hear old blues music that came out of the Southern states, especially Mississippi, and you go down there and catch the way the place looks and smells, you understand where the tempos are coming from and where the space in the music comes from... I’d listen to those records as a kid and I could see every foot of the road.”

—Ry Cooder, musician and film composer

Director John Ford understood that the Western did not end when the 19th century did. In “The Grapes of Wrath” (1940), he carried the imagery of the Western into Depression-era America, replacing cattle drives and gunfighters with dispossessed families, migrant camps, and broken

people struggling simply to survive. The landscape remained vast and unforgiving, but the mythology had changed.

That darker tradition found a natural companion in the blues. Frank Sturgeon's "Drunken Hearted Man" (1948), taking its title from the Robert Johnson song, was among the first Western dramas to build much of its soundtrack around traditional blues songs, field hollers, and spirituals. The raw music accompanied people at their most vulnerable—grieving, frightened, exhausted, and trying to endure. Rather than make the West seem larger than life, the soundtrack to "Drunken Hearted Man" made it painfully human. Over the studio's objections, Sturgeon insisted on recording real Delta blues musicians for his film. As he said, the melancholy of the blues "gives voice to sorrow."

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 57 | Oh My Rosa Lee

"It wasn't photography. It was painting with whiskey and light."

—Hank DeLong, legendary Western cinematographer, on Technicolor

By the 1950s, color had become one of Hollywood's most effective weapons in its fight against the rise of television, and no process was a greater box-office draw than Technicolor. Its proprietary system, widely known as three-strip Technicolor, required a specially built camera that used filters and a beam splitter to expose three separate strips of film simultaneously. Studios generally leased these cumbersome rigs directly from Technicolor, along with the technicians needed to operate them. The three separate film strips were then combined through a dye-transfer printing process, producing Technicolor's famously rich, saturated color.

In time, new single-strip color stocks offered cheaper and simpler alternatives. MGM's Metrocolor, for example, was largely photographed on Kodak Eastmancolor stock using conventional cameras, then processed at MGM's own laboratory.

The most audacious rival was Chromavista 70. Introduced in the mid-1950s, it was a lower-cost process aimed particularly at Westerns and adventure pictures. Its smaller camera system and faster color negative made shooting easier and required considerably less illumination than three-strip Technicolor. Despite its greater speed, the negative remained exceptionally fine-grained and retained strong color reproduction even at lower light levels.

The advantages were famously demonstrated in "Cowboy Junction Saloon" (1959), a Western comedy set largely inside crowded saloons and brothels. Using the new 50 ASA Chromavista negative, cinematographer Preston Mueller was able to light scenes with roughly half the number of high-intensity carbon-arc lights normally required for color photography, leaving more room for actors and animals to move freely through cramped interior sets. The result was one of the more visually chaotic Westerns ever filmed.

During color timing—the post-production process used to adjust color and density—Mueller worked closely with Chromavista’s Burbank laboratory to intensify the film’s reds, yellows, and blues, giving the finished prints a bold, striking palette.

“The first rule of cinematography,” Mueller said, “is to make the shot look cool. And also in focus.”

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 58 | Faster Than The Fastest Gun Alive

For half a century, former Muscle Beach performer Russell “Rusty” Saunders was one of the most versatile stuntmen in Hollywood. Revered for his uncanny ability to mimic the posture, cadence, and physical mannerisms of the stars he doubled, Saunders made his transitions on screen appear virtually seamless. He performed stunts for Gene Kelly in “Singin’ in the Rain” (1952) and Alan Ladd in “Shane” (1953). In 1950, Salvador Dalí even chose Saunders as the model for his *Christ of Saint John of the Cross* painting, the ultimate transition.

Being a stuntman in classical Hollywood was all about dying and resurrecting yourself, take after take. The celebrated memoir *Killing Tate* makes the biblical connection explicit. A legendary stuntman in his own right, Tate Hoffman writes, “Like Christ, we suffered, died, and rose again.”

Hoffman spent four decades being beaten, shot, stabbed, hanged, trampled, dragged behind wagons, thrown from stagecoaches, burned alive, drowned, dynamited, and blown off cliffs in Hollywood Westerns. He writes, “I’ve been killed by John Wayne, Glenn Ford, Jimmy Stewart, Henry Fonda, Gary Cooper, William Holden, Steve McQueen, James Caan, Dean Martin, Lorne Greene, and Clint Eastwood. Each multiple times. Indians have killed me in more ways than I can count. I’ve been killed by outlaws, lawmen, children, cavalry troopers, buffalo soldiers, explosions, trains, runaway wagons, whores, six different horses, and a camel.”

Some of Hoffman’s most memorable deaths required extraordinary sacrifice. In “Rustler” (1957), he was dragged behind a runaway stagecoach over rocky terrain and through an unexpected patch of cacti for nearly a hundred yards before the driverless team of horses came to a stop. Hoffman remained motionless on the ground for two full minutes. Crew members were convinced he had actually died. When the director finally remembered to yell “cut,” Hoffman stood. His left arm hung limp from a broken collarbone, his palms were red from rope burn, and he was covered in blood. All he said was, “Did you get that one?”

A true professional to the end, Hoffman died for the last time at the age of 93. Shortly before he passed away, he told his priest, “I’ve been killed so many times I don’t fear dying.”

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 59 | Tex-Mex Joe (Instrumental)

“Clothes make the man. We make the legend.”

—Hollywood Costume Company, official tagline

Founded in East Los Angeles in 1910 by the husband-and-wife team of César and Juanita Zugasti, the Hollywood Costume Company was originally named the Zugastis Mexican Trading Company and initially sold traditional Mexican clothing and Southwestern attire.

The Zugastis’ small store became a natural source for filmmakers seeking authentic costumes for the earliest silent one- and two-reel Westerns. One day, a producer from the Bison Film Company attempted to return several *trajes de charro* (charro suits; mariachi suits) purchased for a picture because they were no longer needed. César reluctantly accepted the clothes back. When the American Film Company wanted to buy the same suits the following week, César instead rented them to the “Flying A.” After a third production company came looking to buy the exact same *trajes de charro*, the Zugastis understood something other Hollywood-adjacent companies were also beginning to discover: you make more money renting than selling.

By 1915, the Zugastis Mexican Trading Company had become a full-blown costume rental house. Having outgrown their East Los Angeles storefront, the Zugastis moved the entire operation to a larger building at Sunset and Gower in the heart of the rapidly expanding film industry and rechristened it the Hollywood Costume Company to convey glamour and success. Their rebranding worked.

More than a century later, Hollywood Costume Company occupies over 250,000 square feet in a Sun Valley warehouse and contains an estimated seven million costumes and accessories, all available for rent to production companies. It’s as much a museum of film history as a functioning rental house. Over the years and across six different locations, generations of Hollywood stars have passed through its doors to be fitted for costumes or simply to wander the clothing racks, marveling at the past. But perhaps no visitor embodied Hollywood Costume’s living history better than Wyatt Earp.

Earp spent the final decades of his life in Los Angeles, where he befriended cowboy stars, enjoyed the company of filmmakers, and occasionally advised silent movie productions. In June 1927, Earp arrived at Hollywood Costume unannounced. He spent several hours browsing the Western collection, reminiscing about his past, his brothers, and Doc Holliday while offering unsolicited opinions on Hollywood’s many distortions of the Old West. There was one thing, however, that César, Juanita, and their company got right: “If a man aims to kill another man, he should look good doing it.”

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Ballet Bravo Vol. 60 | My Own Terms

The introduction of Charles Bronson's mysterious "Harmonica" character in Sergio Leone's "C'era una volta il West" ("Once Upon a Time in the West," 1968) has long been celebrated as the greatest opening sequence in the history of the Western. For nearly eleven minutes, Leone reduces the genre to its essential elements: three gunmen, an empty railroad station, a distant train, tension, and finally, Bronson's arrival. The sequence remains a landmark of cinematic suspense and visual storytelling.

The greatest Western ending, however, has long been debated. In 2025, *Cinema Monthly* decided to answer the question once and for all. The film journal, published by the American Institute of Cinematic Arts, conducted a rigorous invitation-only international survey of critics, directors, academics, and working film industry professionals from sixty-seven countries. Specifically, the survey included 1,964 critics; 547 directors; and an additional 239 credentialed historians, professors, authors, film theorists, and above-the-line crew members. Each voter was asked to select ten Western endings based on three considerations: their importance to the history of Westerns; their achievement as works of cinematic art; and their lasting emotional impact on the voter's own understanding of Westerns. Each selection counted as a single vote. According to *Cinema Monthly* editors, the methodology was designed to produce "an objective critical consensus from the inherently subjective experience of cinema."

Once all three polls were combined, the result was nearly unanimous: Maurizio Caviola's Spaghetti Western masterpiece "La tomba oltre" ("The Grave Beyond," 1969) was selected the Greatest Western Ending of All Time.

In the film, which Caviola described as his "provocative reaction" to the assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., the antihero known only as the Outlaw is a former slave hunted by a posse for a murder he did not commit. His only companion is a stray dog the Outlaw names Sidekick, acknowledging the dog's unwavering loyalty.

"La tomba oltre" was shot largely in Almería, Spain, where Wild West sets already existed and a curious assortment of photogenic locals was available as extras. For the climactic finale, however, Caviola was determined to capture the exact image he had envisioned. He moved the entire production at great expense to Salinas Grandes, an immense salt flat in Argentina.

There, at a small desolate graveyard, the Outlaw guns down the entire posse but takes a bullet in the belly. Bleeding heavily, he staggers across the salt flat. Behind him, a brilliant red trail streaks the stark white earth. Finally, he collapses and dies. Sidekick lets out a long, mournful howl before lying down beside him. Alberto DiGiomo's haunting score builds; the camera slowly rises and rises and pulls away. The sweeping helicopter shot continues for nearly five minutes until the Outlaw and Sidekick become a single black speck in an ocean of white. The political symbolism is unmistakable; the emotional impact, devastating.

As film historian Miles H. Sheridan once observed, “The perfect Western begins with a stranger arriving. It ends with a hero leaving.”

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Films by Coyote Film & Produce
<https://coyotefilmandproduce.com>

Music by Sonoma Cowboy Players
<https://sonomacowboyplayers.com>

Song Lyrics by Eric Coyote
<https://ericcoyote.com>

The American West Institute
<https://americanwestinstitute.com>

Miles H. Sheridan Foundation
<https://miles sheridan foundation.com>

Ballet Bravo Complete Playlist:
<https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLZ1OMX8SIh18>

The Ballet Bravo Project:
<https://balletbravo.com>

Official Merchandise
<https://riorattler.com>