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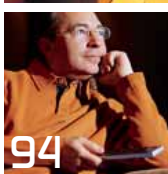
SOUND & VISION



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Avdeco DT250
(avdecoinc.com).
Screen image, Zap
Art/Gettyimages.
Photo by
Tony Cordoza.



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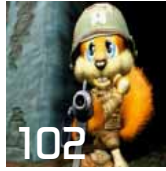
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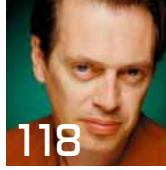
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Our New Look

THERE'S MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE IN THESE VIBRANT PAGES

WHETHER YOU'RE A REGULAR READER OR HAPPEN TO BE BROWSING OUR PAGES FOR THE FIRST TIME, YOU KNOW FROM EXPERIENCE THAT THE WORLD OF HOME AND PERSONAL ENTERTAINMENT IS ALL ABOUT CHANGE. It's usually only a matter of months — *maybe* a year — before the “best” HDTV, MP3 player, DVD burner, or whatever you just bought is outclassed by a spiffy new model (often from the same brand!). It might be a cutting-edge refinement — like “1080p resolution” (turn to page 38 for a look at the first DLP HDTV to incorporate this technology). Or maybe it's a cool feature, like the HDMI connector found on some new DVD players (turn to page 51 for more on that subject). Whatever the new wrinkle is, don't despair. A great HDTV is still great even when that *really great* HDTV comes to town. Besides, we all know that it's only a matter of time before you convince yourself to upgrade again.

Change is also what keeps a magazine relevant and at the top of its game. Looking back over the past six or so years, I'm amazed by the sheer breadth of our coverage — from the curiosity and excitement over groundbreaking products like HDTV to the recent wave of hard-disk-based home and portable gear that lets us experience music, movies, games — you-name-it — *anywhere*. Change has been not only fast and furious but also profound, and the revolution continues as we anticipate the Next Big Thing (HD DVD or Blu-ray, anyone?) or trend (*your* networked home?).

I want to highlight yet another change, one that everyone here at **Sound & Vision** is proud of: our exciting new look. I'd like to thank art director Laura Sutcliffe for spending countless hours exploring idea after idea to define a new high-tech signature for **5&V**. She really nailed it. Thanks also goes to associate art director Maria Ramos, who helped Laura along the way. Bravo!

Beyond our new look, we've also made a few editorial changes. We've expanded “Random Play” (page 16) and packed it with a lively mix of news, commentary, mini reviews, and more. There's everything from Leslie Shapiro's “SnapShot” report on multitasking cellphones (page 21) to Eric Taub's probe into the dark side of today's connected house (page 24) to a glimpse of the first disposable camcorder (page 28).

Next, I want to steer your attention to our new streamlined test-report format. Our goal, as always, is to give you everything you need to make an informed buying decision. And starting this issue, you'll find expanded lab data and comments on our Web site for almost every product we test.

Finally, please be sure to check out “The List” on page 70, a new department where we catalog the best audio/video gear we've tested.

Hope you like the new **Sound & Vision**!

BOB ANKOSKO, EDITOR IN CHIEF



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feedback



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BEYOND LCD VS. DLP

I really enjoyed your "Plasma vs. LCD" (February/March) and "DLP vs. LCD" (June) face-offs, and I sure hope you finish the rear-projection TV playoffs by doing DLP vs. LCoS. We've been hearing about this technology for so long that this face-off is needed now.

DAN PILON / TRENTON, MI

Why didn't you include LCoS in your comparison of DLP and LCD sets? The JVC models I've seen that use the D-ILA light engine have far better brightness and color accuracy than anything else out there. I understand it's not yet cost effective to manufacture the necessary panels, but that's no reason to omit LCoS from your comparison.

JOHN MCGOVERN / MIRAMAR, FL

We've been waiting for the new higher-resolution 1080p LCoS models to appear this fall from JVC (D-ILA), Sony (SXR), and Hitachi. Our next face-off will likely pit a state-of-the-art 1080p LCoS rear-projection TV against a champion 1080p DLP model.

In "DLP vs. LCD," there was no mention of a DLP phenomenon that's very pronounced to me. Whenever I've looked at DLP sets in stores, they've "blurred" on any kind of fast motion. For instance, when a football play begins, the distinct blades of grass become a green pond, and the numbers on the back of a jersey break up into square blocks. Did the reviewers notice any of this?

DENNIS HASSELBRING / LEXINGTON, KY

Al Griffin replies: No, we didn't see those problems during our test, at least with high-quality source material. It's hard to know what's going on behind the scenes at a particular store. For instance, the signal feeding the TVs can be split many ways, possibly degrading the picture. Also, the problems you describe are things we frequently see on HDTV programs, but they're usually caused by poor or overly aggressive digital compression on the part of broadcasters and cable

providers — not by anything the TV does. That's why we used only reference-quality DVDs and high-def D-VHS tapes for our comparison. Also, the smearing artifacts you describe (a.k.a. "image lag") tend to be associated with LCD sets, not DLP.

DEFENDERS OF THE LOST ART

I was thumbing through the July/August issue when John Sciacca's "The Lost Art of the Demo" ("The Custom Installer") caught my interest. Here in upstate New York, we're still blessed with a number of independent shops that sell audio and video gear the old-fashioned way — which means that they have knowledgeable salespeople and that they let you listen and watch at length before you buy. Recently, I went shopping for outdoor speakers. After some extended listening, I paid \$100 more than I'd planned to on a brand I hadn't previously considered because the speakers sounded so much better than anything else in the store. When I'm going to lay out serious bucks for home theater equipment, I always go to an independent specialty store. I might spend more, but I walk away feeling I've bought gear that will give me greater long-term satisfaction.

JOHN HEITMANN / BIG FLATS, NY

"The Lost Art of the Demo" hit my home theater buying experience right on. I spent three months shopping for a front projector and got only two demos. I even called ahead to one store and asked them to set up a projector I was interested in buying. But after three weeks and four visits, nothing happened. I ended up buying an entry-level DLP projector off the Internet without even previewing it. I'm happy with the purchase but might have bought something very different had things gone otherwise.

MIKE BARLOW / VIA E-MAIL

There's one point about the lost art of the demo that John Sciacca failed to

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 KS- Accent Sound: Overland Park • Advance Audio: Wichita • Audio Junction:
 Manhattan • Kansas Audio Video: Topeka.
 KY- King's Great Buys: Owensboro • Ovation Audio: Lexington, Louisville.
 LA- Acadiana Security Plus: Broussard • Alterman Audio: Mandeville,
 Metairie • Home Theater Concepts: Slidell • Mike's Audio: Baton Rouge •
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 MA- Cameras Inc.: Arlington (Boston) • Home Smart Home: North Attleboro •
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 ME- New England HiFi: Scarborough.
 MI- Contemporary Audio: East Lansing • Court St. Listening Room: Saginaw •
 Hod's Home Theater: Waterford • Paragon Sound: Ann Arbor • Paulson's:
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 Freeman's Stereo Video: Charlotte • Intelligent Electronics: Raleigh • Sound Systems:
 Charlotte • Tri City Electronics: Conover.
 ND- Custom Cinema & Sound: Horace (Fargo).
 NE- Custom Electronics: Omaha.
 NH- State Street Disc.: Portsmouth.
 NJ- 6th Avenue Electronics: East Brunswick, Jersey City, Livingston, Paramus,
 Springfield, West Long Branch, West Paterson, Woodbridge • Camera and TV Stop:
 Medford • Monmouth Stereo: Shrewsbury.
 NM- Ultimate Electronics: Albuquerque.
 NV- Ultimate Electronics: Las Vegas.
 NY- Arlington Audio: Poughkeepsie • Audio Breakthroughs: Manhasset • Audio Den:
 Lake Grove • Clark Music: Latham, Syracuse • Hi Way HiFi: Ithaca • JSG Audio Video:
 Binghamton • Media Room: Bedford Hills • Park Ave. Audio: Manhattan • Rowe Photo:
 Rochester • Speaker Shop: Amherst • Stereo Exchange: Manhattan.
 OH- Absolute Theater: Powell • Audio Arts: Youngstown • Audio Craft: Akron, Cleveland,
 Mayfield Hts., Westlake • Audio Etc.: Dayton • Bolden Audio: Canton • Classic Stereo:
 Lima • Ohio Valley Audio: Cincinnati • Ovation Audio: Cincinnati • Stereovisions:
 Columbus • Threshold Audio: Newark • Unique Home System: Cincinnati.
 OK- Tumble Inn: Muskogee • Ultimate Electronics: Oklahoma City, Tulsa.
 OR- Kelly's Home Cr.: Salem • Magnolia A/V: Beaverton (Portland), Clackamas.
 PA- Audio Junction: Pittsburgh • Audio Lab: Fairless Hills • Ed's TV: Hatfield •
 Hi Fi House: Broomall, Jenkintown • Listening Post: Pittsburgh • Palmer Audio:
 Allentown • Park Audio & Video: Altoona, Duncansville • Pat's Stereo: Greensburg •
 Stereo Barn: Wyomissing (Reading) • Stereo Shoppe: Selinsgrove, Williamsport •
 Stereoland: Natrona Heights • Studio One: Erie • Wee Bee Audio Video: Lancaster.
 RI- Stereo Discount Ctr.: Providence.
 SC- Audio Warehouse: Beaufort, Bluffton • Custom Theater & Audio:
 Murrells Inlet • Fusion Systems: Greenville • Upstairs Audio: Columbia •
 White House Audio & Video: Aiken.
 SD- Sound Pro: Rapid City • Sound Pro's: Mitchell.
 TN- College HiFi: Chattanooga • Hi Fi Buys: Nashville • Modern Music: Memphis •
 Sound Room: Johnson City.
 TX- Audio Video: College Station • Bjorn's: San Antonio • Bunkley's Sound Systems:
 Abilene • Don's TV: Tyler • D-Tronics: McAllen • Home Theater Store: Arlington, Austin,
 Dallas, Friendswood, Houston, Southlake • Krystal Clear: Dallas • Marvin Electronics:
 Ft. Worth • Matt Panter Home Theater: Waco • Mesa Home Systems: Austin • Metex:
 Laredo • Mike Massey, Inc.: Odessa • Sound Perfection: Frisco • Soundquest: El Paso.
 UT- Crazy Bob's: St. George • Next Audio Video: Logan • The Theater Experience: Sandy.
 VA- Audio Connection: Virginia Beach • Audio Video by Design: Williamsburg •
 Audiotronics: Roanoke • Home Media Stores: Richmond • Myer-Emco: Arlington,
 Fairfax, Falls Church, Sterling, Tyson's Corner.
 VT- Toner's Satellite: Milton.
 WA- Bunch-Finnegan TV: Kennewick • Magnolia A/V: Seattle & Suburbs,
 Silverdale, Tacoma • Pacific Sight & Sound: Wenatchee.
 WI- Audio Video Pros: Onalaska • Flanner's A/V: Milwaukee • Hi-Fi Heaven: Green Bay •
 Sound World: Wausau • Suss Electronics: Appleton • Team Electronics: Manitowoc.
 WV- Mack & Daves: Huntington.
 Puerto Rico- Precision Audio: San Juan.
 Canada- Adrenalin Audio: Edmonton, Alb. • Advance Electronics: Winnipeg •
 Audio Express: Saskatoon, SK • Audio Video Innovations: Dartmouth, N.S. •
 Bay Blood Radio: Toronto • Canadian Sound: Brampton, Ont. • Environment Electronic:
 Westmount, Que. • Furniture Factory Outlets: Thunder Bay, Ont. • K&W Audio: Calgary •
 Kebecson: Montreal • La Boutique Electronique: Montreal • Lipton's Elect.: Newmarket, Ont. •
 Stereo Plus: Ottawa, Ont. • Stereoland: Windsor, Ont. • The Sound Room: Vancouver, B.C. •
 Unifi: Waterloo, Ont.
 Mexico- Contact Productos Exitosos S.A.: Mexico City.

make: many salespeople can't understand, let alone explain, an effective audio demo. I worked as a home theater supervisor at a major retailer for over a year. We hired and trained many people for our sales staff, and only one or two of them adequately grasped the nuances of sound and performance associated with better-quality speakers. And only one of them actually understood audio well enough to sell it to others. Much of this ignorance is due to the lack of training at retailers nowadays. Audio has become the unwanted stepchild to video in the eyes of many new to home theater. People don't come in looking for audio, and it's often considered an afterthought.

EVAN HAWKER / GRANDVILLE, MI

The art of the demo isn't lost — at least not in Albuquerque. I've been shopping at Hudson's Audio for years, and I've always had the pleasure of not only having a demo but also taking the gear home and listening before I buy. They'll even let you upgrade within a year by trading in what you bought at purchase price, as long as you keep the box, packing material, and manual. The staff wants people to be happy with what they buy, regardless of how much they spend. While that kind of caring might not be everywhere, it does exist.

ANDY ROGULICH / ALBUQUERQUE, NM

I'm saddened by your findings about the lost art of the demo. I work at a Good Guys store in Stockton, California, and I can tell you that the heart of our sales pitch is the demo. I refuse to let customers buy a home-theater-in-a-box system, let alone a nice two-channel setup, without letting them hear and play with it first. The art of the demo isn't dead — at least not at the Good Guys.

RYAN PRICE / STOCKTON, CA

John Sciacca replies: First, I would like to clear up any possible misunderstanding. I didn't say that demos were dead, just that it's getting harder to find a good one. Sadly, our industry has spawned a lot of overnight "experts" who don't seem interested in anything other than making a quick buck. It's great to hear that your store takes such pride in giving customers a terrific presentation. On a side note, I have to add that I have a soft spot in

my heart for the Good Guys. I got my start there out of high school and have always felt that it did a great job of training its sales staff.

POTENT PORTABLES?

I now know which of the portable players in "The iPod Killer Elite" (July/August) look cool and have nice features. What I don't know is how they sound! How could you review audio players and never once mention that? The iRiver caught my eye, but isn't it ultimately about what will satisfy my ears? You dropped the ball on this one.

CLAY WATSON / DIMONDALE, MI

Your point is well taken. We focused on usability and features to find out how each player stacked up against its iPod competitor because we believe these are key to the experience and convenience of using a personal music player. We agree that sound quality is important, but what you hear will likely depend more on the earbuds you use than anything else. And the earbuds supplied with most portable players (iPods included) are mediocre at best. We did note that "sound quality almost always depends more on the audio compression format, bit rates, and earbuds used than the player itself." That

“I'm saddened by your findings about the lost art of the demo. I work at a Good Guys store and I can tell you that the heart of our sales pitch is the demo.” —RYAN PRICE, STOCKTON, CA

said, we understand your concern and will make every effort to include sound quality as part of future evaluations of these kinds of products.

POHLMANN STILL COOL!

In the July/August "Feedback," Timothy Hughes calls Ken Pohlmann's "How Cool R U?" column "downright silly." I, on the other hand, thought it was clever and very funny in the way it presented a new perspective on some hot developments. It doesn't hurt to put a little humor into the magazine once in a while. DAN SHANFIELD / PRINCETON, NJ

We welcome your letters. Send e-mail to soundandvision@hfmus.com and regular mail to Editor, Sound & Vision, 1633 Broadway, New York, NY 10019. Please include your name, street address, and phone number for verification; only your name, city, and state/country will be printed. All letters are subject to editing at our discretion.

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“Mythos sounded like a \$20,000 home theater speaker package that only costs a fraction of the price!”

— Jeff Cherun, *HDTV ETC.*

“Incredible speakers ... absolutely gorgeous with sound that is even more impressive”

— *Consumer Guide*

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hdtv watch

Dramas Trump Reality Shows

And the first woman president of the United States is Hillary — not so fast! It's **Geena Davis**, star of this fall's *Commander in Chief*, ABC's answer to NBC's *The West Wing*. While running the country, Davis juggles twin teenagers, a 6-year-old, and an ambitious husband (**Kyle Secor**). **Donald Sutherland** is the speaker of the House.

Commander is further proof that scripted dramas are re-emerging as the dominant format in prime time. Finalizing their fall lineups, the networks were inspired by the popularity of last season's freshman dramas, including *Lost*, *House*, *Grey's Anatomy*, and (what the Emmys are calling a "comedy") *Desperate Housewives*. This is bad news for nonactors hoping to return week after week in so-called reality shows. But it's good news for HDTV fans put off by standard-definition reality fare like *The Biggest Loser* and *The Apprentice*.

Hoping to garner the ratings of NBC's supernatural detective series *Medium*, CBS is conjuring up *Ghost Whisperer*. It stars **Jennifer Love Hewitt** as a newlywed who communicates with earthbound spirits

seeking her help. CBS also unleashes *Criminal Minds* starring **Mandy Patinkin** and **Thomas Gibson** as FBI profilers, and Fox lets loose *Bones*, in which a group of scientists team up with a skeptical law-enforcement agent (**David Boreanaz**).

Picking up on the spookiness of *Lost*, NBC offers *Surface*, with scientists investigating a new form of sea life. And CBS unveils *Threshold*, in which still more scientists probe an extraterrestrial craft that has landed in the ocean.

Sitcoms, meanwhile, have been on life support, but NBC is premiering *My Name Is Earl*, where a slob (**Jason Lee**) wins the lottery. UPN presents *Everybody Hates Chris*, based on the childhood of comedian Chris Rock. And when *Monday Night Football* completes its run, ABC will debut *Emily's Reasons Why Not*, where **Heather Graham** plays a successful woman whose favorite word in life is "no."

As a bonus, most HDTV series this season will be broadcast in 5.1-channel surround sound, which was far less prevalent even a year ago. — **MICHAEL ANTONOFF**



COMMANDER: BOB D'AMICO/ABC; GHOST: CRAIG SLODIN/TOUCHSTONE/CBS

COMMANDER IN CHIEF (top)
Geena Davis is the president, flanked by (from left to right) Anthony Azizi, Kyle Secor, Donald Sutherland, Harry J. Lennix, and Ever Carradine.

GHOST WHISPERER
Jennifer Love Hewitt is a newlywed who gets spiritually motivated.

Court Nixes Grokster



Predictably, music and movie companies are claiming victory in the Supreme Court's unanimous ruling in **MGM vs. Grokster** that peer-to-peer (P2P) services can be held liable for copyright infringement. But all parties concerned agree that the high court's decision doesn't mean the end of file sharing — instead, **it's a warning that the days are numbered for services that abet free, unauthorized downloads.** Some industry experts say legitimate Internet music sources like iTunes are likely to prosper without "free" competition.

The Court didn't find P2P networks or file sharing inherently unlawful. But it agreed with content owners that courts can consider a software maker's business model (for example, a failure to filter out copyrighted material). And the Court found enough evidence of unlawful intent in the business models of Grokster and StreamCast for them to stand trial.

Two lower federal courts in California had dismissed the suit, citing the **Supreme Court's 1984 Sony Betamax ruling.** Back then, the Court said that although technologies like the VCR might be used for copyright infringement, they have substantial legal uses — and their creators can't be held liable for infringement by third parties. The Court's Grokster decision leaves the Betamax ruling intact, heeding concerns that its reversal would have a chilling effect on invention and innovation.

— STEPHEN A. BOOTH

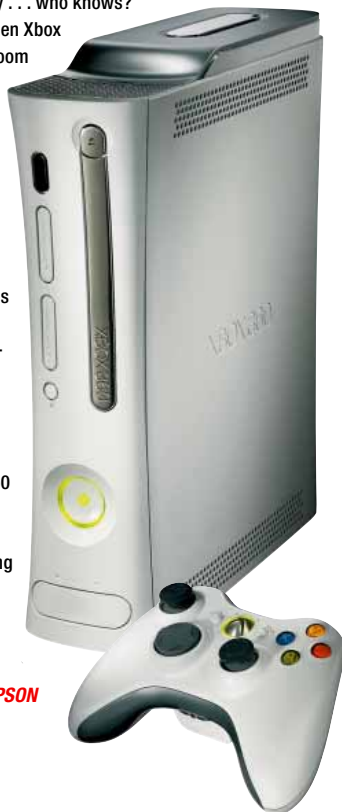
Nextbox

Hey, fans of HD DVD vs. Blu-ray Disc, get ready: another, possibly bigger hi-tech battle is coming. In November, Microsoft will challenge its gaming rivals when **Xbox 360** goes on sale — beating Sony's PlayStation 3 by a year and Nintendo's Revolution by . . . who knows?

Like a Trojan horse, the next-gen Xbox is poised to infiltrate your living room under the guise of a game console, but it's meant to dominate your entire home-entertainment system. Of course, it will offer gaming action in 16:9 widescreen, 720p or 1080i resolution, and Dolby Digital 5.1. But it will also rip CD tracks, talk to your MP3 player, let you buy songs from MSN Music, mate with your digital camera, and connect wirelessly to a PC to stream digital media. Go online, and you can do text messaging, voice chats, and video conferencing.

Surprisingly, whereas Xbox 360 will play high-def games, it won't play HD DVD or Blu-ray discs. Microsoft is mum about supporting either format, but an agreement with Toshiba to "investigate" codevelopment of HD DVD might provide a clue about which way it's leaning.

— DREW THOMPSON



ALL ILLUSTRATIONS, JACK GALLAGHER, EXCEPT AS NOTED



iPOD PIT STOP

iGUY (\$35)

"I'm not Gumby, dammit!" Just an amazing simulation (above). Your iPod slides into this rubberized figure via the slot in its . . . iPosterior. Bend him, shape him — scare the cat! (speckproducts.com)

iPOD SOCKS (\$29)

Yeah, 30 bucks for a sock. But these knit-cotton cuties (in green, gray, blue, orange, and pink) will keep your \$300 iPod safe. Um, why aren't they called iSocks? (apple.com)

DECO DOCK (\$32)

This colorful, USB 2.0-enabled dock will protect your iPod shuffle when transferring songs or charging. And it has a nub to park that pesky cap. (pdrop.com)

— STEWART WOLPIN

15 minutes

with RIC OCASEK

The former Cars leader and current alterna-band über-producer (Le Tigre, Weezer, Nada Surf) gets back in the driver's seat with his sixth solo set, **Nextday** (Inverse/Sanctuary), a sharp return to the Boulevard of Songwriting Basics.

— MIKE METTLER

You once said that you write the same song your whole life, but you "try to make that one song better." Does that still hold true for you?

I still think it's kind of true. People who write songs have writing styles, you know? Your style will develop over the years, but the songs will always be coming from the same mind and heart. It's like a chapter in a book. It's not the final chapter, nor is it necessarily the most important chapter.

That's a good analogy. I like listening to an artist's work in the order it was intended — as ongoing chapters, to use your word — but I also like listening to things randomly on my iPod.

Actually . . . I've never even held an iPod. That's probably strange, huh?

Stop the presses! [both laugh]

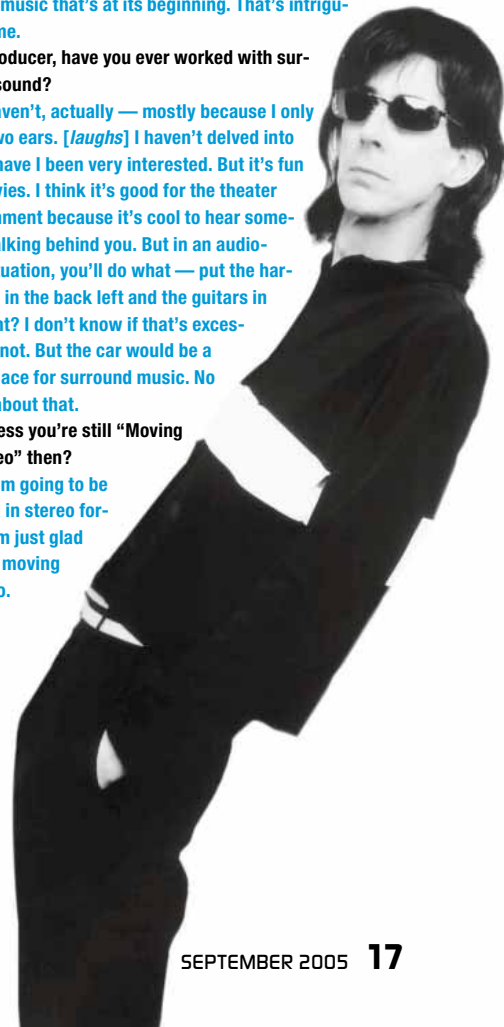
My family has one, though. I love the concept. I'm pro-iPod. I wish we had one back when I was touring. But I wouldn't have much time for it now because what I listen to the most is demos from bands. I love listening to music that's about a year ahead, music that's at its beginning. That's intriguing to me.

As a producer, have you ever worked with surround sound?

No, I haven't, actually — mostly because I only have two ears. [laughs] I haven't delved into it, nor have I been very interested. But it's fun for movies. I think it's good for the theater environment because it's cool to hear somebody talking behind you. But in an audio-only situation, you'll do what — put the harmonies in the back left and the guitars in the right? I don't know if that's excessive or not. But the car would be a good place for surround music. No doubt about that.

So I guess you're still "Moving in Stereo" then?

Yeah, I'm going to be moving in stereo forever. I'm just glad I'm not moving in mono.





Does smart, innovative technology need complexity?

Although technology has been advancing at a rapid rate, consumers still seek simplicity. The Philips way of thinking is just that: creating innovative products that are designed for the way people live. Inventing the technology behind the CD and co-inventing the DVD was one of the first steps in responding to consumers' desires: Philips continues to meet those needs today by creating products that are technologically advanced yet easy to use.

Sense and simplicity is not just a belief, it's how Philips thinks about product development: products such as its flat TV with Ambilight technology (which emits light and color beyond the frame and onto the walls because people naturally watch television with their peripheral vision). It all just makes sense. So it's not just about creating forward-thinking products; it's about making sure those products respond to what consumers have been looking for all along.

**Join us on our journey at
www.philips.com/simplicity**

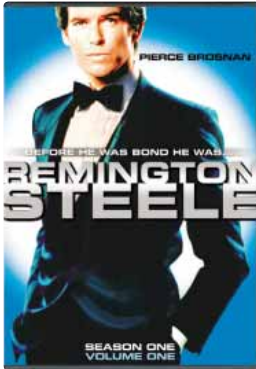
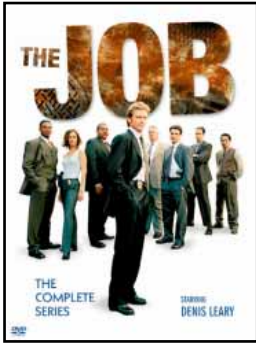


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Philips Flat TV with Ambilight. There's no sense in going back in time, so you'll never want to turn off the world's first and only Ambilight feature. It's unlike anything you've experienced before. The Ambilight effect will fill your room and your eyes with the color on your TV screen. The flat TV with Ambilight technology from Philips – the next step in the evolution of television. For more information and to find the retailer nearest you, check out www.flattv.philips.com.

PHILIPS
sense and simplicity

TV on DVD



THE JOB: THE COMPLETE SERIES
The vitals: 4 discs, 19 episodes (2001-02), 5 commentaries, 7 featurettes (Shout! Factory).
The gist: Quick-tongued NYC detectives, led by alcohol-soaked pill-popper Mike McNeil (Denis Leary), talk about and do *anything* but solve crimes. "It's probably the last cop show not about procedure," says co-creator Peter Tolan. **Best commentary moments:** As he's talking about the pilot, Tolan's cell-phone rings, leading to a Leary theory on who's calling and why. And Leary gives a bladder-busting description of "the walk" during Episode 3, "Bathroom."
The verdict: A *Job* well done, and the perfect antecedent for Tolan/Leary's current show, *Rescue Me* (see review on page 101).
REMINGTON STEELE: SEASON 1
The vitals: 4 discs, 22 episodes (1982-83), 3 commentaries, 3 featurettes (Fox). **The gist:** Ace P.I. Laura Holt (Stephanie Zimbalist) fabricates agency head Remington Steele. A faux Steele (Pierce Brosnan) comes along and suavely assumes the role. They never mix business with pleasure — well, almost never. "We were trying for a 1930s *Thin Man*/romantic-comedy/mystery show," says co-creator Michael Gleason. They succeeded. **What's missing on DVD:** Input from Zimbalist (perhaps next box, says Fox). Brosnan reverently chimes in, though. **The verdict:** Steele cagey after all these years. — **MIKE METTLER**
 (For complete interviews with Tolan and Gleason, go to our Web site.)

THE NUMBER

676.5%

Increase in DVD sales and rentals last year

Total tally in bucks: \$21 billion!

Sources: Motion Picture Association of America, Digital Entertainment Group

Got Bugs?

Sure you do — it's the dog days of summer. But you haven't seen bugs until you've seen *Bugs!* Shot in the rain forests of Borneo, the Imax movie focuses on the lives of a mantis and a butterfly, with a supporting cast of scorpions, tarantulas, leeches — you get the idea. And you can get the film on a Sensio 3-D DVD. Hook up a Sensio processor between a DVD player and a front- or rear-projection TV, put on wireless LCD glasses, and different images are fed to each lens. The processor, an infrared emitter, and two pairs of glasses cost \$3,000. Sensio is also getting involved in the professional realm. Most recently, it oversaw all 3-D aspects of the production of Robert Rodriguez's film *The Adventures of Shark Boy & Lava Girl in 3-D*. To check out the Montreal company's other applications and releases, go to Sensio.tv. And for more about those big bugs, go to (where else?) giantscreensbugs.com.

— KEN RICHARDSON



snapshots

Cell Division

NOKIA
 N90 cellphone
 Price to be set
 Nokia.com/nseries

SAMSUNG
 SCH-A890 cellphone
 \$220
 Samsung.com

Quick! What do you grab when you have three minutes to pack? In my rush, I abandoned my usual camera, PDA, MP3 player, and laptop. Instead, I scooped up two third-generation (3G) cellphones: the Nokia N90 and the Samsung SCH-A890. Could these feature-laden toys replace all that stuff? The **Nokia N90's** forte is a 2-megapixel camera with a Carl Zeiss lens for stills and MPEG-4 videos. You also get a 20x digital zoom. It was easy to send visual taunts to

friends stuck back home, and between photo ops I searched the Web to find the best martinis. This phone is bigger and heavier than some others, but that's a tradeoff for better optics. The 2 1/8-inch dis-

play offers excellent color and 352 x 416-pixel resolution. The Nokia also has an MMC memory-card slot for storing plenty of downloaded MP3 files.

The **Samsung SCH-A890's** killer app is Verizon's video-on-demand VCast service (\$15 a month), which I used for downloading 5-minute clips of news, entertainment, or sports highlights. Then there's Verizon's EV-DO broadband connection (included with VCast), which let me readily stream music and videos. The phone has a 1.3-megapixel camera. E-mailing images home was quick and simple. The Samsung isn't a super-slim model either, but it's compact compared with the Nokia.

Both phones replace a bunch of other gear. Each has messaging, Net access, still/video imaging, music playback — and they make calls, too! On my next dash, I'll grab the Nokia for serious imaging or the Samsung for fast Internet access and downloading. Either way, it'll take less than *one* minute to pack. (For more about 3G cell-phones, turn the page to "Reality Bytes.") — **LESLIE SHAPIRO**



BUGS! IMAGE QUEST 3D/SENSIO



REALITY BYTES

Ken C. Pohlmann

Connecting the Dots

3G PHONES WILL DO ALL YOUR IPOD DOES AND MUCH MORE

SORRY TO BREAK THE NEWS. But your shiny, spiffy iPod is an obsolete piece of junk. Ditto the other electronic toys you tote in your L.L. Bean knapsack. They'll soon be vacuumed up, integrated, and reissued as a new paradigm that we can't live without.

Here's what I mean: Suppose you have three dots, spaced equidistantly. Logically, you'd connect them to form a triangle. That kind of brilliant thinking is exactly what captains of industry are doing. When you connect the three dots — computers, telecommunications, and entertainment — you get the Swiss Army phone. No, I'm not talking about a red phone with a knife blade and tweezers (though a corkscrew would be nice). I'm talking about 3G phones, the third generation of cellphones.

Cellular telephones were first test-marketed in Chicago in 1977 to 2,000 people. They must have been impressed, because 28 years later, there are over 180 million subscribers in the U.S. alone. According to the Cellular Telephone Industry Association, wireless service revenue was \$102 billion last year. For many folks, cellphones are vital to everyday life. I know people (no names) who might absent-mindedly go out their front doors without wearing pants, but by golly, they won't forget their phones.

That reliance on cellphones is about to escalate. 3G phones are characterized by high-bandwidth connectivity. That seems innocent enough, but the ramifications are huge. For example, a 3G could subsume all the functions of a PDA, allowing high-speed e-mail and Web surfing and shopping. Throw in photos, videos, music, multimedia messaging, and video gaming, and you start to get the idea. (See "Snapshots," page 21.)

A cellphone really is the ideal platform. It has a user interface, storage, audio playback, and a video display. In other words, it's a *really* small multimedia computer. If it can't do a task with onboard circuitry, it can connect to another system that can. If the connectivity is fast, the line between onboard and outboard functions begins to blur.

Consider some of the applications. You ask for directions to Hollywood and Vine; the phone downloads the data. As you navigate, it gives you voice-guided instructions. If you deviate, the navigation adjusts its directions. Or how about this? The radio is playing a song, but you can't remember the name of it. You place a call and hold the phone up to the speaker. The system identifies the song and tells you the title.

As cellphones expand into data and entertainment, music will lead the way. Consider, with current portable players, you have to rip CDs or download to a computer and sync files to a dedicated player. With a cellphone player, you can wirelessly (and quickly) download music right into it. Downloading to phones is already big business in the U.K. and other countries. Ask yourself, would you rather carry around a cellphone, an MP3 player, a PDA, and . . . or just a phone that does everything?

Sure, I could be wrong. Three dots could also be connected to form a circle instead of a triangle. But I'm betting on phones. And your old iPod, freshly loaded with 5,000 songs? Bummer: it's history. But send it to me. I'll find it a nice home.

S&V



Meanwhile, Back at the Format War

Even though a lot of people would rather see a single format, it now looks like the two high-definition rivals, HD DVD and Blu-ray Disc, are going to duke it out in stores. The first HD DVD players and movie titles are supposed to be available by Christmas, the first Blu-ray products by next spring.

Unification talks between the two camps broke down over an inability to compromise on the disc's physical structure. Hollywood studio execs are apparently still lobbying behind the scenes for a single format — fearing that an ugly format war will cause people who might otherwise be interested in getting a high-def player to sit on the sidelines. But both camps say they've invested too much time and money for an easy deal to be made.

Toshiba says it will sell an HD DVD player in December for about \$1,000. The company has developed two new HD DVD discs: a 45-gigabyte single-sided triple-layer disc and a dual-sided hybrid that can hold 30 GB of HD content on one side and 8.5 GB of standard-def content on the other. And movies? Warner Bros., Paramount, and Universal promise nearly 100 titles by year's end.

With Blu-ray's debut farther out on the horizon, product plans are more vague, although the format's backers say that both players and recorders will be available when it does launch. TDK announced it has developed a prototype four-layer Blu-ray Disc with a 100-GB capacity, although there are still questions about how soon those discs can be mass-produced.

— JAMES K. WILLCOX

QUOTABLE!

“It's like having a cow's udder sewn to the side of my face. Painful and humiliating.”

— TOM WAITS, OBJECTING TO TV CAR ADS THAT IMPERSONATE HIS VOICE AND MUSIC



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SONY

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ES

like.no.other™

THE CONNECTED HOUSE

Eric Taub



House Arrest

HOW HACKERS COULD SPOIL YOUR CONNECTED PARADISE

IF YOU'VE EVER HAD A VIRUS OR WORM INFECT YOUR PC, you know the havoc it can wreak: files that won't open, erased hard drives, your entire music collection lost. But how would you feel if it wasn't just your music that you lost but your entire house?

I realized this possibility after checking out a very cool product: an Internet oven. Not only does this device cook and then chill your food, but you can program it to do so remotely. Then again, if I could operate it remotely, so could my worst enemy. Maybe a bitter ex-girlfriend would think it was really clever to turn on my oven to 600° for two weeks while I was on vacation. Sound farfetched? It isn't. "Smart" appliances are already available in other countries. Connect all these appliances to your security system, HDTV, PC, music system, and then out to the Web, and you'll have one very smart home. You'll also have a home that a hacker could easily fling into chaos.

But someone operating a connected house would be wise enough to close it off to electronic intruders, right? Wrong. How many PC users do nothing to prevent their computers from becoming infected with viruses?

Telling a washing machine to run delicates through the heavy-duty cycle might not excite a teenage hacker, but that's not the point. A network is only as strong as its weakest link. A hacker could use your router's Port 25, the one open to receive e-mail, and then send a message with malicious code to your PC — not to bring down your hard drive, but to infiltrate your networked home-security system and disable it.

And hackers are getting more clever. This spring, ransom-ware began appearing on PCs — code that locked every file on the hard drive. The only way to read the files: send money to a specified e-mail address and get a decryption code in return.

So what's a connected homeowner to do? Pretty much what any PC owner should be doing already — and probably isn't. You need multiple layers of defense. First, use a router with a built-in firewall. At a minimum, protect your wireless network with a WEP (wired equivalent privacy) password, and change it regularly. Open only one port on your router, and add a user name and password for it. If you plan on accessing your home network from only one external location, restrict access to that single IP.

But these precautions won't help you if you open an e-mail attachment from some nogoodnik. Even if there's no attachment, don't open an e-mail if it, the subject, or the sender looks suspicious. When you open HTML-formatted e-mail — the kind with fancy text and illustrations — you send a signal back to the sender that your e-mail address is legitimate. And HTML e-mail isn't always easy to spot because it can be disguised to look like a plain text message.

It's a dangerous world out there. So be smart — the more devices we connect to our digital homes, the easier it's going to be to lose everything in the click of a mouse. **S&V**

BitTorrent: The Video Grokster?

Now that the Supreme Court has ruled against Grokster, users of BitTorrent file-sharing software may be feeling a bit nervous. Created by programmer Bram Cohen, BitTorrent enables legitimate, fast downloads of large files. But many people use it to distribute copyrighted content like movies.

BitTorrent (free at BitTorrent.com) is easy to install and use. The key feature is its "swarming" ability: you share bandwidth with everyone else downloading the same file, so downloads go faster the more popular they are. Like other peer-to-peer programs, BitTorrent has many legal applications, and Cohen himself has denounced using it to get



around copyright. Several BitTorrent hubs on the Web that were flagrantly distributing copyrighted content have been shut down, though BitTorrent itself hasn't been targeted.

But the wide availability of movies on the Net has spurred some in the film industry to try to stay one step ahead of pirates. Revelations Entertainment, co-founded by Morgan Freeman, has partnered with Intel to form ClickStar. Unlike other legit movie-download sites like CinemaNow and Movielink, ClickStar plans to make available first-run movies that aren't yet on DVD. Presumably, not all of them will star Morgan Freeman. — PETER PACHAL

Whistling Disney

In October, Disney will unleash a line of pre-recorded MMC music cards for tweens (that would be kids older than 9 but younger than 13). The tracks are in WMA format, and the cards are designed to slip into new Disney digital music players (\$60), though they'll also work in any player that can read WMA files with an SD or MMC slot. The first batch of titles includes *Disney's Greatest Hits*, *Radio Disney Ultimate Jams*, and *That's So Rave*. Disney says the preloaded cards offer tweens an easy path to digital music, bypassing computers and credit cards. — REBECCA DAY

BIT TORRENT: JOHN UELAND

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THE CUSTOM INSTALLER

John Sciacca

The Rules of Home Theater

THE "SHOULD" AND "SHALLS" OF AN INSTALLATION

FEW SPORTS HOLD AS FAST TO THEIR TRADITIONS AS GOLF. In fact, one of the sport's ruling bodies is known as The Royal and Ancient. Before I was a custom installer, I was a golf pro at a swanky club in northern California. One of my responsibilities was officiating at tournaments, and believe me, it was important to have a deep knowledge of the rules before handing out an unpopular ruling to a member.

One thing I learned about the rules early on was the difference between "should" and "shall." While "should" refers to things a player doesn't *have* to do, but ought to, "shall" leaves little room for interpretation. Violating a "shall" can earn you a two-stroke penalty (or loss of the hole in match play).

Setting up a home theater isn't very different. While there's no rulebook, there *are* definite guidelines for correctly hooking up your TV, DVD player, surround sound components, and speakers to bring the theater experience home. And there are some things you *should* do to get the most out of your system, and other things you *shall* do to make it work at all.

Having pioneered surround sound, Dolby Labs is probably the closest thing the A/V world has to a governing body. Since speaker placement is one of the most important steps in installing a system, Dolby.com shows where your speakers *should* be placed for proper surround imaging (click on "Room Layout and Speaker Setup"). Follow these guidelines as closely as your room permits.

While your surround system *should* have speakers that can handle the kind of deep bass that shakes the floor, to fully enjoy the cinematic impact you *shall* use a decent subwoofer to convey a movie soundtrack's low-frequency effects (LFE) channel.

When connecting your TV, you *should* use the best possible video connector. You'll get a much better picture with a component- or S-video cable than with a composite-video cable. If you plan to watch HDTV shows, you *shall* use at least component-video cabling because composite- and S-video cables can't carry these signals. If possible, you *should* use DVI or HDMI cables because they keep the signal in the digital domain, bypassing a potentially degrading round of digital-to-analog-to-digital conversion.

To get the best possible surround experience, you *should* take the time to properly adjust your system. Using the setup facilities in your receiver to balance channel levels and compensate for the varying distances from each speaker to the listening position lets you hear the soundtrack the way the filmmakers intended.

To get the best possible sound from your DVD player or digital cable box, you *shall* use a digital audio cable, either optical or coaxial. This is necessary because Dolby Digital and DTS soundtracks are sent to your receiver in digital form. If you use the analog connections, you'll miss out on a lot of the performance you've paid for.

Golf's Rule 6-1 says, "The player and his caddie are responsible for knowing the Rules." The same goes for your A/V system. If you don't know the rules, consider hiring an installer who does.

The difference between a system that's merely installed and one that's installed *right* is often a matter of details. But those details separate systems that look and sound good from the ones that look and sound great.

S&V



Scorsese on Dylan

Was he ever so young? Yes, that's Bob Dylan in 1961, just turning 20, and it's one of the rare sights you'll see in Martin Scorsese's two-part documentary on the singer's early career. *No Direction Home* will have its U.S. broadcast premiere on September 26 and 27 on PBS's *American Masters* series. And there'll be plenty of Dylanalia to go with it:

The CDs: On August 30, Columbia/Legacy offers a two-disc soundtrack of unreleased performances as Vol. 7 in Dylan's *Bootleg Series*. It also serves up *Live at the Gaslight 1962* — but you can only buy it at Starbucks, which has an 18-month exclusive on the title.

The DVD: On September 20, Paramount issues the doc on DVD with extensive extras.

The Books: The same day, Simon & Schuster publishes the paperback of Dylan's *Chronicles, Vol. 1*, followed on October 1 by *The Bob Dylan Scrapbook, 1956-1966*. — K.R.

NEWS+
NOTES

➤ **It's an iPod World — We're Just Shuffling Through It:** "Download Your Music . . . Upgrade Your Apartment," say the folks at Peter Cooper Village and Stuyvesant Town in Manhattan, who are offering a free iPod with all new leases (pcvst.com). In other iPod news, Apple now has a recycling program. Drop off your old iPod at any Apple store for "free, environmentally friendly disposal" and get a 10% discount on a new one. Meanwhile, Apple has tentatively settled a class-action lawsuit over faulty iPod batteries. To see if you're eligible for new batteries or \$50 vouchers, go to appleipodsettlement.com.

➤ **Get Sirius? A Stern Rebuke:** In a survey on which satellite radio option it should offer, Hyundai found that many customers didn't want Sirius because they don't want Howard Stern, who moves there in January. (Anybody remember how to change stations? Guess not!) Hyundai ultimately went with XM.

DYLAN: IRWIN GOODE/PBS; ILLUSTRATION: JOHN UELAND

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TECH TALK

David Ranada



Roll Your Own HDTV

NOW ANY TOM, DICK & HARRY ROCKEFELLER CAN SHOOT IN HD

NOTHING BEATS USING HOME MOVIES TO EVALUATE TVs. You choose what to shoot so you can stress a specific aspect of screen performance. Since you're the cameraman, you know precisely what each scene is *supposed* to look like. And since you control the signal, you can eliminate the many layers of visual second-guessing and "tweaking" that take place, say, as a film morphs from a camera negative into a DVD. Of course, the footage itself must be high quality. So I've been lugging a *high-definition* camcorder around town looking for video stress tests that could be distributed to our reviewers in a practical HD format.

Sony was kind enough to lend me its top consumer camcorder, the ultra-deluxe (and ultra-expensive) HDR-FX1. It produces the best-looking video I've ever seen from a home camcorder. My shots of Times Square at night produced footage whose smooth motion, color accuracy, brilliance of highlights, richness of detail, and freedom from visual noise easily trounce video from the first HD camcorder I tried a couple of years ago (a JVC model) as well as any similar footage I've seen on DVDs.

Along with the camcorder, Sony provided a copy of Vegas, a professional-grade PC editing package that's ideal for manipulating FX1 footage (sonymediasoftware.com). Though not as easy to use as your typical let's-make-a-home-movie program, Vegas is enormously more powerful, and it does high-def without flinching. Aside from editing functions, it offers a convenient way to convert FX1 footage — which comes out of the camera as an MPEG-2 "transport stream" — into Windows Media Video (WMV) HD.

When used properly, Microsoft's WMV HD video codec delivers outstanding quality. It's one of the systems being considered as an encoding method for the upcoming high-def disc system(s). Using it has tempted me to investigate making high-def DVD-ROM discs that are *directly* playable in computer DVD drives (that is, without first copying the video from a DVD-ROM to a hard disk). Microsoft has defined how such discs can be made and has even issued a few commercially — like the high-def version of *Terminator 2* and a series of Imax movies ([visit wmvhd.com](http://visit.wmvhd.com) for previews).

But going the playable-DVD route requires learning at least *two* computer languages (HTML and JavaScript). I'm already hardware-challenged; using a 3.2-GHz, hyperthreaded Pentium 4 going full blast, it took 35 minutes to convert a 105-second high-def segment into a WMV HD file. "Rendering" a 90-minute high-def production would take about 27 *hours* of continuous number crunching.

Nobody said going high-def would be easy. Or cheap: the camcorder alone costs \$3,700, and Vegas goes for \$450, plus you need a kick-ass computer to run it effectively. The whole process, at least in this early stage of HD home movies, is not for the short-of-time, faint-of-heart, or empty-of-pocketbook. You also might want to think twice if you aren't savvy-of-computer.

S&V

Room Service! Eggs and XM!

Roadside motels used to tout color TV to lure guests. Now some hotels are making a similar pitch — with satellite radio and iPods.

This fall, Hyatt will begin offering XM satellite radio in more than 50,000 rooms. Each room will have a custom-made XM receiver with a channel guide and information on how to subscribe. Frequent Hyatt guests will be treated to discounts on some XM receivers.

The W Hotels in New York City's Times Square and Los Angeles/Westwood offer Sirius satellite radio via XACT plug-and-play tuners, available in some suites. Guests can even buy their own tuners at the gift shop.

Boutique hotels are eager to be hip. Dream, also in New York, provides iPods and portable DVD players. And the Crescent in Beverly Hills includes an iPod Music Minibar in each of its 40 lounge-bar theme rooms. The iPods are anchored to desks and connected to speakers for in-room listening. You get jazz, electronica, and (of course) lounge music. Like what you hear? Buy CDs at the hotel for the trip home.

The piano bar sure is looking (and sounding) passé. — PETER SUCIU

Pose, Then Dispose

The One-Time-Use Video Camcorder, made by Pure Digital Technologies and sold at CVS and other drug/photo stores, works like this: Shoot a home movie. Play it back (and cut the embarrassing stuff). Take the unit to the store. Get a finished DVD in return. Drawback: the \$30 gadget (not including \$13 for processing) gives you only 20 minutes of recording time. Still, for disposable-camera fans who need a last-minute fix without investing in a full rig, the disposable camcorder might do just fine. Coming soon: the disposable home theater. (Just kidding!) (Or are we . . . ?) (Cue *Twilight Zone* theme.)

— K.R.



*“... the subwoofer the other guys will have to beat,
and that’s very bad news for them!”*

— Wes Phillips, onhometheater on the Seismic™ 12



Seismic™ Series



Seismic™ subwoofers ... just the name evokes feelings of bass that descends to extraordinary depths, a place where hearing ends and feeling begins. Bass we have no right to expect from a 12 or 14” cube, yet Seismic™ subwoofers deliver! And loudly! Then there is the definition—every note, every nuance, each musical subtlety perfectly preserved and resolved.

Four years in development, Seismic™ subwoofers radically redefine high-end performance in subwoofers of this size: Ultra-Class-D™ amplifier—massive amounts of real power (4500 watts peak/1200 watts RMS) at more than 90% efficiency; mineral-filled co-polymer polypropylene cones with RCR™ Resonance Control Ribs; die-cast chassis; balanced-plane high-velocity passive radiators. Technology that puts the Seismics in a class of their own.

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Hot gear from the world of home entertainment

flat gets phat



Toshiba's 42HPX95 HDTV (\$4,000) shows where plasma sets are going: loaded with features and more affordable than ever. Not only does the TV come with a built-in digital tuner and CableCARD slot — so getting high-def shows is as convenient as possible — but a feature called THINC (Toshiba Home Interactive Network Connection) lets the TV act as a media receiver. That means you can use its remote to play MP3 music files and view digital photos stored on a PC elsewhere in your home. Not that the 42-inch (diagonal) screen needs anything extra to be the center of attention. tacc.toshiba.com, 973-628-8000



> Fine Tuning

Radio will never sound the same again once you turn on **Polk Audio's I-Sonic (\$599)**. The stylish table radio will let you tune into some of the 350 or so stations in the country that broadcast HD Radio signals, which usually provide song titles and artist names, scrolled on the front-panel display. Still nothing worth listening to? Just switch over to XM satellite radio's 150+ channels of music, news, talk, and sports (you did get a \$12.95/month subscription and \$49 XM antenna, right?). The I-Sonic also packs a DVD/CD player and has auxiliary inputs for jacking in your iPod. Available October. polkaudio.com, 800-377-7655

NOTE All prices and product information supplied by the manufacturers. Dealer prices may vary.



pyramid scheme

Last year Bose added a proprietary connector to its Lifestyle DVD systems for streaming music to other rooms. And now that the company has introduced the AL8 wireless audio link (\$399), you won't even need cables to have multiroom audio. Consisting of two 3-inch-tall black pyramids (a transmitter and receiver), the system wirelessly streams uncompressed music via Bose's FreeField technology, a proprietary scheme similar to Wi-Fi. The AL8 works with any Bose link-enabled gear. bose.com, 800-444-2673

> Sound Partners

MartinLogan's tower speakers are known for their big electrostatic panels, like the one on the **Summit (\$9,995 a pair)**. Its panel stands 5 feet tall and is mounted on a base that provides . . . um, bass. While smaller than in other ML designs, the base still packs a punch: its two 10-inch woofers, each with a 200-watt amplifier, are said to hammer out notes down to 24 Hz. Not bad for a speaker you can see through.

martinlogan.com,
866-605-6596

What's Up, Dock?

Now that you've got an iPod, do you find yourself listening to your home stereo less and less? It doesn't have to be a competition if you have **Kensington's Stereo Dock (\$90)**. Just plop your iPod in the cradle, and the Dock brings all your tunes, playlists, and podcasts to your home system — charging up the player at the same time. A wireless remote is included, and all iPods with the dock connector are welcome. kensington.com, 800-235-6708





CSI When You Want It

Just sit back and relax — Sony's RDR-HX715 DVD recorder (\$700) takes saving TV shows to a new level of convenience. TV Guide On Screen makes it easy to time-shift programs, plus the 160-GB hard disk means you won't have to erase any of them for a while. Hookup becomes effortless if you use the digital HDMI output, which conveys both video and audio through a single connector. sonystyle.com, 800-222-7669



> Serve Me

Kaleidescape's latest whole-house movie systems (\$22,500 and up) boast new software that lets you locate titles by director, actor, or genre and a server (shown) that holds content from 660 DVDs. Not enough? Add more servers until Blockbuster gets jealous. Systems include a DVD ripper and movie player and provide playback in as many as 25 zones. kaleidescape.com, 650-625-6150

Finish Line

Whether you get Energy's Reference Connoisseur speakers in cherry, rosenut, or black-ash finish, one thing's for sure — you'll be adding some style to your listening room. The real wood, hand-rubbed veneers encase cabinets reinforced with Energy's Interloc bracing system, making them as sturdy as possible without sacrificing volume. All Connoisseur models, including the RC-70, RC-50, and RC-30 towers (shown, left to right, \$2,000 to \$550 a pair), use light and rigid resin-coated Kevlar woofers, which are said to improve sonic accuracy. energy-speakers.com, 416-321-1800



Simply Seen

Although you'll appreciate the big features of RCA's Scenium HD61LPW167 HDTV (\$2,999) — like the 61-inch DLP screen, the integrated high-def tuner, and TV Guide On Screen — it's the little things like the fully backlit remote that'll make you feel pampered. And when you hook up your DVD player to the HDMI input, which shuttles both audio and video, you'll truly be living the simple life. rca.com, 800-336-1900



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Forbes Magazine

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Beyond this new level of performance are feature-laden benchmarks of quality, versatility, and simplicity. The slot-loading CD player is neatly hidden behind a drop-down door. Plug your iPod® or other MP3

player into the convenient front port. Connect a TV to one of the auxiliary inputs and you've got home theater-like dynamics. All while operating remotely, or with simple button controls. No other tabletop CD/Radio does all this, or does any of it so well. To find out where to purchase the MicroSystem CD, visit us online at www.bostonacoustics.com.

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DLP and the DLP logo are trademarks of Texas Instruments. Resolution comparison based on pixel count of 720p HDTV and 1080p HDTV.



Web Wanderer

NOKIA 770 INTERNET TABLET

>>> **COOL FACTOR** Sure it's nice to browse the Web and check your e-mail while on the go, but with a 4 1/8-inch, 800 x 480-pixel screen, Nokia's Wi-Fi-enabled mini PC is begging for you to check out some digital photos and MPEG-4 movies, too. It's a shame there's just 128 MB of memory onboard, but you can add more with a MultiMediaCard.

>>> **BONUS** If a Wi-Fi network isn't close by, the 770 can still connect wirelessly to the Internet through your Bluetooth-enabled mobile phone. There's also a dedicated Internet radio application. Playing hits from the future, no doubt.

\$350 • NOKIA.COM, 888-256-2098

Tiny Tunes

CREATIVE ZEN NANO PLUS MP3 PLAYER

>>> **COOL FACTOR** Once you've picked your favorite from the ten colors, you'll have an MP3 player that's about the same size as the iPod shuffle but throws in a screen — handy if you keep forgetting the names of songs. Or artists. Or everybody you meet at parties. Okay, maybe not that last one, but why doesn't somebody come up with a gadget for that?

>>> **BONUS** Not only is there a built-in FM tuner and voice recorder — which can record from the tuner — but the little guy also comes with a sports armband and belt clip. Plus, indeed.

\$150 (1 GB); \$120 (512 MB) • CREATIVE.COM, 800-998-1000

Visionary

OAKLEY THUMP MP3 SUNGLASSES

>>> **COOL FACTOR** Oakley's Thump sunglasses can compete with serious MP3 players now that a 512-MB model has joined the line. It plays all the MP3, WMA, and WAV tracks you can stuff into that half-gig of flash memory, and it comes in three slick color combos.

>>> **BONUS** Never get tangled in earphones again! The earbuds swivel and extend to ensure you get a snug fit so you feel front and center with the music.

\$495 • OAKLEY.COM, 800-431-1439

'Mondo Mayhem

GIZMONDO HANDHELD GAME CONSOLE

>>> **COOL FACTOR** Bringing games and movies to a 2 7/8-inch screen in the palm of your hand, Gizmondo looks like a close cousin of Sony's PSP. But instead of using UMD discs, the Giz gets its media via SD cards, with games and MPEG-4 videos running on its Windows CE operating system.

>>> **BONUS** Where to start? Besides letting you play music files and take VGA-quality snapshots, Gizmondo knows exactly where it's at thanks to a built-in GPS locator that you can track through another GPS device like a cellphone or PDA. Thieves, beware!

\$229 • GIZMONDO.COM, 904-279-9240



Expert advice on home theater, audio & video



PICTURE FREEZE

Q. We're considering a 26- to 37-inch plasma or LCD TV for our second home in Cape Cod. But we're not at the house during winter, when the temperature is set at 56°F. Will either plasma or LCD be affected by the low temperature, and if so, which one would hold up best?

BRIAN LOWRY / WASHINGTON, DC

A. A.G. says: Unlike LCD TVs, plasma models start at 37 inches, so in the 26- to 37-inch range you'll find more options in the LCD camp. Approximate operating temperatures range from 50 to 100°F for LCD, and 33 to 100°F for plasma, so either one should survive the winters at your temperature-controlled vacation home.

ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN UELAND

SILENT PICTURES

Q. I have a DVD changer, and I've noticed that on a few rented DVDs, the picture shows up but there's no sound. The discs play fine on my other, older DVD player. Any thoughts?

BLAKE CARLSON / EDEN PRAIRIE, MN

A. I.G.M. says: Obviously the soundtracks aren't actually missing from

those discs, so there must be some menu setting that's preventing them from being heard. My bet is that your changer is set to recognize only one of the digital surround systems — DTS or Dolby Digital — while your older machine is either set for the other one (or stereo PCM) or can detect and play any of the formats. Go into the changer's setup menu and make sure the machine

is set to play whatever surround format is present on the DVD.

HDPC HEADACHE

Q. I'm confused about HDCP (High-bandwidth Digital Content Protection). My JVC projector has a regular DVI input without HDCP. My PC connects to that input and works perfectly. I tried using a DVI-to-component

Tim Ries *The Rolling Stones Project*
Brian Blade Bill Charlap Sheryl Crow Michael Davis Lisa Fischer Bernard Fowler
Bill Frisell Larry Goldings Darryl Jones Norah Jones John Patitucci Keith Richards
John Scofield Kent Smith Luciana Souza Charlie Watts Ronnie Wood

One of the most anticipated new jazz CDs of 2005

Rolling Stones saxophonist Tim Ries, with the help of some amazing guest artists, presents newly arranged and reimagined jazz versions of Stones classics. This musical adventure is not to be missed.



(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction
 Honky Tonk Women
 Paint It Black
 Ruby Tuesday
 Wild Horses
 and more
 Catch Tim Ries on tour with The Rolling Stones all year!

adapter to route the PC signal through my receiver for switching, but since the image is noticeably better with the direct DVI connection, I'm thinking of upgrading to a receiver with DVI or HDMI jacks. Will some or all signals be stopped from passing through the DVI cable because the projector doesn't support HDCP?

JACK KOSANKE / SPOKANE, WA

A. A.G. says: Sorry for the bad news, but without an HDCP-compliant DVI input on your projector, you won't be able to watch HDCP-encoded HDTV programs — like those on premium satellite or digital cable channels — whether they're switched through a receiver's DVI output or not. You'll still get nonencrypted cable and satellite shows, and you shouldn't have a problem switching other non-HDCP-compliant DVI sources, like a PC or a DVD player. But if you want to watch the good stuff on HBO HD or Showtime HD, you'll have no choice but to fall back on your projector's analog component-video input.

JACKS ARE WILD

Q. I'm confused about optical, coaxial, and S-video connections. Optical and coaxial seem to contain both video and audio; is there any benefit of one over the other? Is S-video for video only, requiring a separate audio connection?

WAYNE SEELEY / LINCOLN, VT

A. I.G.M. Says: Connection options get more daunting as the days go by, but the older ones are pretty straightforward. Optical and coaxial digital links carry audio signals only, the former by a fiber-optic cable and the latter by a more-or-less conventional metal wire. They deliver precisely the same information, so the only thing that should determine which one to use is what your equipment supports. Be sure to check this out when buying your gear. More than one buyer has had the unpleasant shock of finding out that both his DVD player and satellite box, say, have only coaxial outputs, while the receiver offers only one optical and one coaxial input.

S-video is, as its name implies, for

Have a question about audio, video, or home theater? Send e-mail to soundandvision@hfmus.com (put "Q&A" in the subject line) or regular mail to Q&A, Sound & Vision, 1633 Broadway, New York, NY 10019. Please include your name, street address, and phone number for verification; only your name, city, and state/country will be printed. Sorry, but only questions chosen for publication can be answered, and all letters are subject to editing at our discretion.

video only and requires a separate audio connection. It separates the color and black-and-white components of a video signal to improve picture quality. In most cases, an S-video connection produces a much better picture than a regular composite-video connection that uses ordinary RCA jacks.

FULL-RANGE SURROUND

Q. Is there any problem setting up a 5-, 6-, or 7-channel system using all floorstanding full-range speakers? Would I miss any surround effects with the speakers on the floor?

EDUARDO DE GODOY / SÃO PAULO, BRAZIL

A. I.G.M. says: No problem at all. In fact, that's an excellent configuration if you want to play both multichannel music and soundtracks. It really becomes more of a practical question of whether you have the money (it's a costly option) and the space for tower speakers. Using floorstanding speakers for the surrounds isn't a problem as long as the paths between them and your listening position aren't blocked. **S&V**

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Mitsubishi

Special Report: 1080p Comes to DLP

As amazing as HDTV looks, it's hard to believe it can get better. But that is indeed the promise of a new generation of HDTVs just hitting stores. Collectively, they use what's known as "1080p" technology, and its goal is nothing short of delivering all the detail carried by today's high-def broadcasts.

Though 1080p resolution has been a feature of some flat-panel LCDs and a few high-end LCoS (liquid crystal on silicon) big-screen sets, this is the first year it will be widely available in relatively affordable rear-projection HDTVs. That's because 1080p can now be realized with DLP — Texas Instruments' popular Digital Light Processing "micromirror" technology. The 52-inch Mitsubishi WD-52627 is among the first of a slew of 1080p DLP models coming to market.

I'm a fan of DLP's picture quality, so I was eager to see how this new Mit-

subishi would do, especially since it's much less expensive than previous big-screen 1080p TVs. At \$3,700 list, the WD-52627 brings higher-resolution big screens to ordinary shoppers.

WHAT'S 1080p?

Anyone who's ever shopped for an HDTV has faced the terms 1080i and 720p. These numbers describe the most commonly used HDTV broadcast signals as well as an HDTV's native display format. Any signal an HDTV sees at its input must be converted to its native format before it can be displayed. The "i" or "p" part describes whether the HDTV displays signals as interlaced or progressive video. More often than not, this depends on the display technology. CRT-based HDTVs, whether direct-view or rear projection, are usually native 1080i — the picture is made up of 1,080 horizontal scan lines flashed up as two fields in rapid succession, each containing half the lines (though in reality, very few displays can produce all 1,080 lines). All fixed-pixel HDTVs — LCD or plasma flat panels, or rear projectors based on LCD, DLP, or LCoS light engines — are progressive-scan displays that flash up all of their horizontal and vertical lines of pixels at once, in the same 1/60 of a second an interlaced display uses to put up one field. But until now, most were limited to 720 horizontal lines of resolution.

Thanks to their bright images and slim profiles, 720p DLP, LCD, and plasma TVs are extremely popular. But the most common broadcast format by far is 1080i. At any moment, these signals carry more than 2 million pixels of information in a 1,920 x 1,080 grid — more than twice as many as 720p. Yet today's 1080i and 720p HDTVs can't get them all onscreen at the same time. The TVs simply don't have enough pixels or produce enough scan lines to do the job. So they convert the signal, essentially throwing out resolution.

WHAT WE THINK

Mitsubishi's first 1080p DLP set delivers a superb picture overall and a modest bump in resolution over 720p.

Here's where 1080p comes in. Done properly, it has two key advantages over lower-resolution HDTVs. First, depending on the technology used, the pixels in a 1080p TV will likely be either packed more closely (as with a typical square-pixel grid) or have overlapping footprints onscreen (as in the new DLP technology). That can vastly reduce or eliminate visible gaps between the pixels — the so-called “screen-door effect” — creating a smoother, more natural picture.

Second, when you see “1080p” describing an HDTV, it means the set's imaging element can theoretically display all 2 million of those pixels in a 1080i signal at once (or the visual equivalent). And since 1080i converts more cleanly to 1080p than to 720p, it's easier to preserve all that original picture detail. To be sure, going from a 720p to a 1080p display is an evolutionary step — nothing like the upgrade from standard to high-def TV. But the technology has the potential to finally let HDTV be all it can be.

Virtually all the major TV makers are jumping on the 1080p bandwagon. Along with Mitsubishi, Samsung, Toshiba, and even HP are releasing sets based on a new micromirror DLP chip from Texas Instruments, though it's one that doesn't actually have the 2 million-plus discrete pixels required for 1080p. A clever technique nicknamed “wobulation” is used to achieve apparent 1080p performance with only half the number of mirrors that would otherwise be required (see “Pixel Magic,” page 40). Meanwhile, JVC and Hitachi have 1080p LCoS-based models, Sony is expected to announce new 1080p LCoS sets, and LCD makers will likely follow suit.

It's only natural that the emergence of 1080p TVs would spawn talk of full-on 1080p broadcasts,

which would show us those 2 million pixels at twice the frame rate of a 1080i signal. But 1080p would hog twice as much broadcast bandwidth as 1080i or 720p signals, and broadcasters are already pressed to deliver that much. I'd expect 1080p programming to first be available on next-generation Blu-ray Discs or HD DVDs (though neither camp has announced any plans yet for 1080p). In any event, most of the 1080p HDTVs expected this year can't even accept a 1080p signal via their HDMI or component-video inputs. But the lack of native 1080p source material shouldn't prevent you from enjoying the benefits of 1080p with regular high-def programs.

SETUP While the WD-52627 is Mitsubishi's lowest-priced 1080p DLP, it doesn't hurt for options. It includes more connections than any set in its class, including a pair of HDMI inputs, two FireWire ports and three component-video inputs. And it has Mitsubishi's NetCommand system, which uses an onscreen interface to control all the gear that can be connected.

A CableCARD slot offers the potential for watching digital cable without an external cable box. Like most other similarly equipped late-model HDTVs, the set includes the TV Guide On Screen program guide to make up for the loss of your cable company's electronic program guide. Though free, TV Guide is a less-satisfying solution that requires you to manually re-order the channel lineup to match your cable system, and it's earned a spotty performance record because of its dependence on local cable feeds for program information.

Still, if you're determined to lose the set-top box, it's better than nothing.

I liked the Mitsubishi's extensive picture-quality controls. New this year are two picture presets, Bright and Natural, each of which can “remember” your specific adjustments for contrast, brightness, and color temperature for each input (but not color, tint, and sharpness). This is a great feature for tweekers like me who want custom settings for day and night viewing.

The set also allows users to fiddle with the individual levels of six colors, which let me easily optimize the color balance. A video noise-reduction feature is onboard, but it softened the

PLUS

Sharp high-definition images.
No visible pixel structure.
Deep blacks.
Accurate, well-saturated color.

MINUS

Occasional rainbow effects.
Unable to fully resolve 1080i sources.



The TV brought out all the fine detail in the bleak landscapes of icy Hoth.

key features

- 1080p DLP light engine
- 6-color user-adjustable color balance
- 6 picture presets
- 2 HDMI, 2 FireWire, 3 component-video inputs
- NetCommand onscreen remote-control system
- Digital cable-ready with CableCARD slot and TV Guide On Screen
- Fully backlit remote control
- 9-format memory-card reader for digital photos and audio files

test bench

The WD-52627 measured well in most key areas. Notably, multiburst patterns used to test resolution looked better than on any 720p DLP television I've tested, proving additional resolution for the 1080p format — although the WD-52627 still couldn't resolve every pixel of a 1080i image. The HDMI inputs were decidedly sharper than the component-video inputs on both test patterns and program material, so I recommend using them whenever possible. The key areas of grayscale tracking and color decoding were also close to dead-on after calibration. Black-level retention was relatively good, as was brightness uniformity, with only minor hotspots toward the center.

Full lab results on S&V Web site



image, so I left it off for critical viewing.

PICTURE QUALITY My first experience of the WD-52627's home theater performance came courtesy of *The Empire Strikes Back* from the *Star Wars* Trilogy on DVD. This is my favorite *Star Wars* flick, and its restored picture looked stunning. I immediately appreciated the blackness and depth of space as the camera descended toward the ice planet of Hoth. The shadowy corridors of the rebel base evinced natural gradations from light to dark and few traces of noise.

I also saw the hallmarks of excellent color balance in the icy world. Leia's face showed a subtle flush as she was teased by Han about her wanting him to stay and fight. As Luke lay in the snow, the wound on his face was colored a deep red but his skin tone looked realistic — not oversaturated.

While the Mitsubishi's color was strong and accurate, the color-wheel system used to pro-

duce color in this and all other DLP TVs is generally more problematic than the three-chip system used by LCD and LCoS sets. The spinning wheel occasionally caused faint trails of color, or "rainbows," along the edges of bright objects. Many viewers don't notice these trails, but I saw them about as often on the Mitsubishi as on previous DLP sets I've tested.

Fine details, on the other hand, looked great. I set my high-end Denon DVD player to upconvert its output to 1080i format, and the WD-52627 rendered intricate parts of the image with all the clarity I could wish for. From the old-school instrumentation in the Snow Speeder cockpit to the myriad domes, ports, panels, and ridges in the hull of an Imperial Star Destroyer passing overhead, Lucas's imaginings appeared highly realistic.

With a twinge of regret at leaving Lucas's galaxy, I went far, far away to look at some true high-def sources. My first stop was HDNet, a 1080i network that was showing a Marianne Faithfull concert. I was immediately impressed by the sharpness of the picture — she was wearing a blouse covered with newsprint, and headlines and subheads in smaller type sizes were clearly visible. I could pick out a few misplaced strands of her blonde hair, and again the deep blacks and shadows of the dimly lit club were deep and clear.

My next stop landed on ESPN's broadcast of the *Home Run Derby*. As I watched Bobby Abreau knock dinger after dinger over the left-field wall, I basked in

the realism of the crowd and the immaculate field. I could read slogans on people's shirts and caps, discern collective expressions of awe as a homer sailed overhead.

One of the most impressive aspects of the WD-52627's image quality in high-def and otherwise was the complete lack of visible pixel structure. An image of bright light streaming in through a window appeared clean and natural, with no trace of the pixel grid. Even with my nose right up to the screen, it was nearly impossible to detect any pixels at all. If you like to sit close to the screen like I do, 1080p DLP makes a big difference.

1080p Vs. 720p I was curious to see how 1080p stacked up against its predecessor, so I compared the WD-52627 side by side with a 50-inch 720p DLP set we had on hand. After adjusting the two for optimum image quality and similar brightness, I fed them the same sources via an HDMI distribution amplifier.

Watching the Marianne Faith-

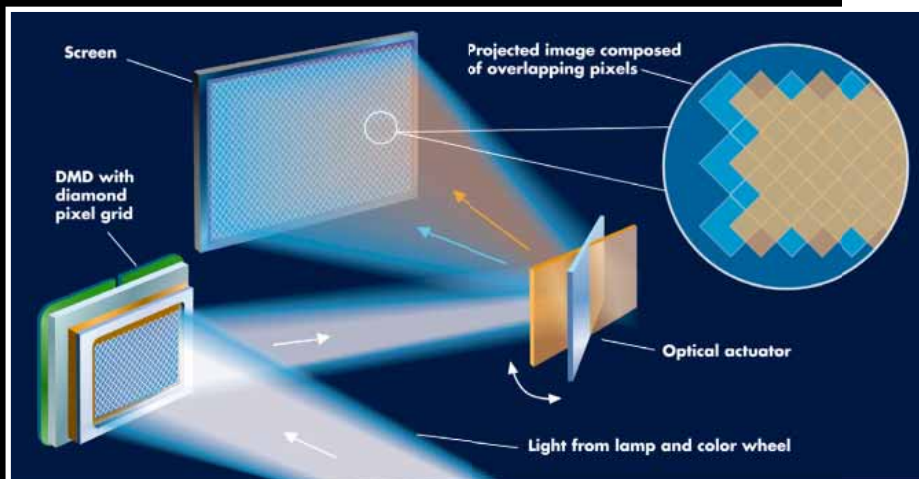
PIXEL MAGIC: HOW TI PUTS THE 1080p IN DLP

Digital Light Processing (DLP) is today's most-popular fixed-pixel, or "microdisplay," rear-projection technology. It relies on a chip — called a DMD, or Digital Micromirror Device — that's covered with microscopic mirrors, each representing one pixel of light on the screen. But rather than try to mass-produce a chip with all 2 million-plus mirrors needed to create a 1080p image, DLP developer Texas Instruments took a different route.

Using an HP technique known as "wobulation" (TI calls it SmoothPicture), TI achieves a 1,920 x 1,080 effective pixel resolution using half that number of mirrors. Wobulation relies on the same principle as interlacing, which shows half the picture at a time, but so rapidly the eye combines the two parts into one. Starting with the square pixel design of its 720p DLP chips, TI turned each mirror 45° relative to the sides of the display, creating rows of diamond-shaped pixels. There are only 960 x 1,080 micromirrors on the grid, but each of them, in effect, creates two separate pixels, one after the other.

During operation, light from the lamp bounces from the chip to a device called an optical actuator, a reflective panel that pivots. In its first position, the actuator reflects half

of the image information (the odd-numbered pixels) onto the screen. After 8 milliseconds, the actuator switches position — or "wobulates" — half a pixel-width. Simultaneously, the chip flashes up the picture information for the other half of the image (the even-numbered pixels). This process is so quick that it's impossible to differentiate between the sets of pixels, and the entire frame, with all 1,920 x 1,080 pixels, is "constructed" within the standard 1/60-second field time. — D.K.



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full concert, at first I found it difficult to see any difference in sharpness. Certain edges appeared just a bit sharper on the Mitsubishi, though it was extremely close. But on a Discovery HD airing of *The Science of Lance Armstrong*, the difference was more obvious. The

tiny words used in a computer illustration of a bike were clearly sharper on the 1080p screen. Stubble-covered heads and faces, finely woven mesh shoes, and even the glitter under the paint on the bike frames were extremely sharp on the Mitsubishi and somewhat less so on the 720p TV. Another Discovery Channel show, about the FA-18 fighter, included a close-up of a dummy bomb assembly with tiny words of "warn-

ing" whose edges were more distinct on the 1080p display.

Across the board, though, the difference wasn't dramatic and often depended on program material — less critical viewers would have to look hard to see it even in side-by-side comparisons. It was definitely there, however, and was evident in resolution test patterns, which showed noticeably more detail than on any 720p DLP set I've tested. The Mitsubishi still fell short of fully resolving a 1080i signal, but I expected that. The screens in all rear-projection HDTVs enhance brightness but sacrifice some resolution to do it, and a 52-inch screen just won't allow the full potential of the chip to shine through. I expect larger 1080p DLP sets to perform much better on this test.

On another note, I did notice an occasional bit of instability in the Mitsubishi's picture. In one instance, during the *Lance Armstrong* episode, as the camera slowly zoomed toward someone onscreen, the glare from a black picture frame in the background undulated slightly. Similar effects occurred with test patterns using 1080i sources, and I suspect they were related to wobulation. But they weren't seriously distracting, and the picture overall was rock-solid the vast majority of the time.

BOTTOM LINE Video enthusiasts will find 1080p a compelling upgrade, and the lack of visible pixels alone is enough to recommend the Mitsubishi WD-52627 over a similar-size 720p DLP or LCD television. Stepping up to a larger screen size would probably make the higher resolution of 1080p much more apparent. Still, despite being the easiest "sell" on an HDTV's spec sheet, resolution is only one part of image quality. Factors like depth of black and accurate color play a larger role. Combine the WD-52627's higher resolution with its all-around top-notch picture, and you've really got a powerful package. **S&V**

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Plasma for Less

A trio of sleek HDTVs you can actually afford

Cool, but expensive — that's the attitude most people have toward plasma HDTVs. If we were still living in the dark ages, circa 2001, such an outlook would be warranted. But it's 2005, and the prices for plasma TVs have spiraled down, down, down. How much money do you now need to score a 42-inch high-definition plasma TV? Around \$3,000 or even less, and that kind of a deal doesn't have to mean a big compromise in picture quality.

Like the stock market, plasma pricing tends toward sudden, dynamic dips — the TV you have your eye on today will likely cost even less tomorrow. With this in mind, we called

in three plasma HDTVs spotted selling on the Web for around three grand or less: JVC's PD-42X795, \$3,200 (\$5,500 list); Dell's W4200, \$2,599 direct from Dell (\$3,000 list); and Maxent's MX-42XM11, \$2,000 (\$2,500 list). But you can't assume that all "budget" plasmas are created equal. So we put these low-bidders through our usual rigorous procedures to see well how each stood up. This involves tweaking the TV using both the set's standard user controls and hidden "service" controls that only technicians have access to. What differences — if any — would we find as we stepped up in price? Let's now turn our attention to the wall to see what, value-wise, these TVs really get us. ➤

PHOTOS BY TONY CORDOZA

WHAT WE THINK



PD-42X795

This stylish TV has decent picture quality and cool features, but falls short of the competition.



W4200

With its crisp, natural picture, excellent tuner, and low price, this could be the sweetest flat-TV deal going.



MX-42XM11

Unbelievably low price for a plasma HDTV, but a mediocre picture means it's not really a great deal.



JVC HDTV with all the frills

While many low-cost plasma TVs require a separate digital tuner to watch local high-definition broadcasts, JVC's PD-42X795 packs in not just a tuner but also many other cool features. That list includes built-in speakers and a separate control box with a complete set of connections including HDMI, VGA, and FireWire (so you can hook up one of JVC's digital VCRs and record HDTV). A heavy-duty aluminum base that comes with the TV lets you confidently set it up on a table or stand. The remote control is a bit chunky, but it has a generously spaced button layout and a backlit keypad. At its top you'll find the Aspect button, which lets you switch between four picture-display modes (three can be accessed for HDTV programs).



SETUP Since the JVC has an antenna input for grabbing local digital and high-def broadcasts, my first order of business was to plug in an antenna and let the TV's Channel Search function rip. The JVC easily grabbed most of the digital channels in my area. The Fox affiliate was the lone holdout, but most HDTVs I've tested have had a problem with it.

I initially had my Scientific Atlanta HD cable box plugged into the set's HDMI input. But the TV proved to have a sharper picture when I used its component-video input for high-def, and test patterns confirmed that using the HDMI input resulted in a softening of the picture. I'd recommend sticking with the component-video inputs. Surprisingly, there are no custom picture memories for each of the TV's inputs, a common (and valuable) feature today.

PICTURE QUALITY After making service-menu adjustments to the picture, I dropped *The Aviator* into my DVD player. In the scene of the premiere party for Howard Hughes's 1930 film *Hell's Angels*, colors looked clean, and there was good sense of shadow depth and detail. I could see slight variations

in the black shades of the men's tuxedos, and the evening gowns worn by the starlets had a rich, vivid appearance. A later scene where Hughes test pilots a new plane didn't fare as well. The picture had punchy contrast, but the highlights had a "burned-out" appearance, and the normally wispy clouds looked ragged and patchy.

The JVC's clean, natural color and punchy contrast was also evident when I watched HDTV programs like HBO's *Six Feet Under*. An opening shot of a mobile home in the California desert showed sharp detail in the exterior decorations and plants. In a later scene where Nate studies his face in the mirror while shaving, his skin looked mostly natural, with only a hint of redness.

BOTTOM LINE JVC's PD-42X795 is a sharp-looking plasma TV with a solid feature set and decent picture quality, especially for HDTV. But the occasionally patchy image, lack of a custom picture memory for each input, and softened resolution when using an HDMI connection keep it from getting an unqualified recommendation.

THE SHORT FORM

PLUS

Good tuning of over-the-air HDTV.
Solid blacks with good shadow detail.

MINUS

Somewhat soft HDTV picture via HDMI.
Occasional "patchy" picture effects.
No custom picture memory for each input.

key features

- HDMI, VGA, and component-video inputs
- FireWire port for HDTV recording
- 1,024 x 768-pixel resolution
- Built-in HDTV tuner

test bench

After calibration, the JVC's grayscale tracking was about average at ± 500 K, and its color decoder performed well. A gray full-field test pattern revealed picture noise, which was also visible in some program material, and HDTV multiburst patterns confirmed softening of the picture on the HDMI input.

Full lab results on S&V Web site



Dell

Dude, you're getting a Dell . . . plasma

When computer companies first made the jump into the business of selling plasma TVs, I cast a cold eye on the occasion. Weren't those guys busy enough already supporting the billions of PCs out there with their daily virus updates and blue screens of death? But after receiving Dell's W4200 plasma HDTV, I started to warm up a bit. The W4200 looks a lot better than your average low-price plasma sold through PC channels. Staring at it, my thought was: I wouldn't mind hanging this set on my wall.

Other things that add to the Dell's warm and fuzzy appeal are its built-in HDTV tuner, wide array of back-panel inputs, and well-designed onscreen menus and remote control. The remote has a substantial feel and echoes the TV's black/silver look. The buttons on its top half are backlit, and the bottom ones are spaced far enough apart that you can easily locate a specific control in the dark. Pressing the Size button calls up a list of five display modes, each of which can be accessed when watching HDTV.

SETUP AND USE After I connected my antenna, the Channel Add feature of the Dell's digital tuner successfully added the full lineup of digital broadcasts in my area. The set's onscreen program guide posted the titles of upcoming shows for digital channels, but it unfortunately listed program start times incorrectly — a problem Dell says it is working on. When you press the Display button on the remote, you see a screen that lists the digital channel ID (WNBC-HD, for example), signal strength, and both the digital channel number and its analog "alias" (Channels 67 and 2, for example).

Adjusting the Dell's picture was a snap thanks to a Personal picture preset that could be customized for each video input. The Normal setting gave the most natural and accurate picture of the four color-temperature presets, but shadows and skin tones looked a bit reddish, so I made adjustments in the set's service mode. The only real picture problem I saw was that blacks looked too bright via the S-video input, which translated to limited shadow depth when watching movies or TV.

PICTURE QUALITY To check out the Dell's picture quality, I revisited *The Aviator* on DVD. In the movie-premiere scene, colors showed a distinct Technicolor punch

without looking noisy or lurid. This made it easy to see slight variations in hue between Kate Hepburn's lipstick and the red velvet curtains in the background. In this and other scenes, skin tones looked balanced, neither too orange nor too red. Meanwhile, details in the partygoers' black tuxedos and other dark images showed off the Dell's strong shadow rendition.

HDTV programs like *Six Feet Under* also looked very good. The sunlit scenes that opened one episode had strong contrast — highlights on the surface of a trailer home looked entirely natural, and I could see fine gradations in the shadowy inner branches of the surrounding trees. Picture detail was very good, which helped bring to life the interior shots of an old woman's ceramic-frog collection and a finely textured wall-hanging next to it.

BOTTOM LINE The entry of computer makers into HDTV space hasn't been a totally happy affair, but with Dell's W4200 things are looking up. This set's nice styling, strong features, solid picture quality, and reasonable price add up to a winning package.

THE SHORT FORM

PLUS

- Crisp HDTV and DVD pictures.
- Natural color and contrast.
- Excellent built-in HDTV tuner.
- Clear, detailed onscreen menus.

MINUS

- Dark gray blacks via S-video inputs.
- Onscreen guide lists wrong times.

key features

- HDMI, DVI, VGA, and component-video inputs
- 1,024 x 768-pixel resolution
- Built-in HDTV tuner with onscreen guide
- Custom picture memory for each input

test bench

After calibration, the Dell's grayscale tracking was excellent. A -25% green channel error in the color decoder was apparent only on component video — HDMI was perfect.

Full lab results on S&V Web site





Maxent At 2k, it's almost a giveaway

The Web is filled with lots of things, including plasma TV deals that seem too good to be true. But when we confirmed that Best Buy was selling \$2,000 plasma HDTVs from a company called Maxent, we had to check one out. With its black screen border and silver case, the MX-42XM11 shares some design elements with Dell's plasma. It also comes with a reasonably sturdy plastic stand and separate side-mounted speakers.

The Maxent's lack of an analog or digital tuner means you'll need your own cable, satellite, or off-air tuner/decoder box to watch TV. In contrast to the Dell, which got a shout-out for its onscreen menu system, this set's menus get a thumbs-down. The problem is speed: After you press buttons on the remote control, the sub-menus take a painful second or two to render.

The remote control lacks a backlit keypad, but the buttons are big and easy to locate. Direct video inputs (nice!) and the Wide button for selecting display modes are hidden beneath a sliding door — an unfortunate location since it makes the frequently used input buttons hard to get at. Five display modes are available, two of which (4:3 and 16:9) can be used for HDTV.

SETUP The first review sample Maxent sent had all sorts of problems. Adjusting picture controls for one input affected the picture on other inputs, the set wouldn't display any standard 480i signals, and using the DVI input with my digital cable box resulted in a momentary copy-protection error message every time I changed channels. Fortunately, a second sample TV had none of these issues. The Low color-temperature setting delivered pictures that were reasonably close to NTSC spec except for a moderate blue-green bias in shadows.

PICTURE QUALITY Checking out the Maxent's picture on DVDs, I noticed a degree of "shredding" visible as breakup on fine diagonal and vertical lines. In

the black-tie premiere from *The Aviator*, shadow depth was solid, and a decent amount of detail was visible in the tuxedos, but the highly saturated colors looked soft and noisy. The skin tones of party-goers also lacked subtlety, tending toward a uniform, reddish-orange hue. And in the shots of Hughes zipping through the sky on a test flight, the clouds had a rough, patchy quality that obliterated much of their detail.

HDTV programs like *Six Feet Under* looked slightly soft, but they had punchy contrast. For example, in a shot of the trailer home against a desert sky, the TV conveyed the intense quality of the desert light. And though the Maxent tripped up on "Technicolor" scenes from *The Aviator*, it did a good job here of conveying the less vivid tones of the ceramic-frog collection. But the reddish skin tones that I saw on the DVD also extended to HDTV.

BOTTOM LINE Maxent's MX-42XM11 plasma TV sells at an amazingly low price, but its limited features and relatively mediocre picture make it something less than a great deal. This is definitely a situation where spending a few more bucks will get you more. **S&V**



THE SHORT FORM

PLUS

Low price for a plasma HDTV.

MINUS

Noisy picture quality.
No analog or digital tuner.

key features

- DVI, VGA, and component-video inputs
- 1,024 x 768-pixel resolution
- PIP (picture-in-picture)

test bench

Grayscale tracking on the Maxent was poor, explaining why skin tones had a red/orange tint despite a relatively accurate Low color-temperature preset. Test patterns revealed a degree of picture noise and some softening of detail with HDTV signals.

Full lab results on S&V Web site



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Television History

INNOVATIONS IN TV VIEWING

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Remote Control



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DVD + HDMI

Three players that know how to keep it digital

One of the hot new features in DVD players is something you don't really see. I'm talking about that HDMI connector lurking on the back panel. With its ability to carry both high-definition video and multichannel audio on one cable, the High Definition Multimedia Interface can greatly simplify home theater hookup. But there's more to HDMI than convenience. Since the signals it carries are digital, an HDMI link between a DVD player and a digital TV allows the purest flow of video from disc to screen, skipping a cycle of digital-to-analog-to-digital conversion that can degrade image quality.

What's more, each of the three players tested here employs special processing that "upscales" regular 480i DVD video to an HDTV signal format (720p or 1080i) and uses the HDMI connector to send it to your HDTV. The goal, of course, is to get the best possible picture quality — an image that, while not as detailed as true HDTV, is as smooth and clear as DVD can be. So does upscaling plus HDMI equal a better picture? At least with these players, it largely depends on how well your HDTV converts analog component video to digital. If your set does this well and has good upscaling, you probably won't see much difference between a player's component and HDMI outputs. That was my experience with the high-end DLP front projector I used. On TVs with less than perfect processing, though, you might see a cleaner image using HDMI, just as our TV reviewers sometimes report.

It turns out, though, that the determining factor in picture quality was how these players handled the initial conversion from 480i to progressive-scan 480p, which occurs *before* upscaling to an HDTV format and affects images carried by both the component-video and HDMI outputs. As you'll see, some players definitely do this better than others. ▶

PHOTOS BY TONY CORBOZZA

WHAT WE THINK



SD-5980

A decent and very affordable HDMI player with versatile media-card slots, but run-of-the-mill picture quality.



DVD-HD950

Beautiful styling and DVD-Audio via HDMI are nice touches, though video performance was just average.



DVD-577

Delivered some of the best progressive-scan video seen at any price, and it's a fine music player to boot.

Toshiba

HDMI on a budget

Aside from its HDMI output and attractive \$150 price, the Toshiba SD-5980 has two unusually versatile features going for it — the two media-card slots on the front panel. Between them they support an impressive array of flash-memory formats, including SD/MMC, xD, and CompactFlash cards as well as Memory Sticks. Not only will the player display slideshows using pictures stored on the cards, but it will also play music stored as MP3 or WMA files. Beyond this, the SD-5980 is pretty much standard-issue and includes such common features as zoom and multiple bookmarks but little else. The remote control was easy to use thanks to its nice, spacious layout.

THE SHORT FORM

PLUS

Cheap for an HDMI-equipped player. Compatible with multiple flash-memory formats. Good remote control.

MINUS

Mediocre progressive-scan video. Noisy analog stereo outputs.

key features

- HDMI output
- Plays MP3, WMA, and JPEG on CD-R and memory cards
- Accepts SD/MMC, xD, CompactFlash, and Memory Stick flash-memory formats

test bench

Test patterns clearly showed a rolloff in vertical resolution using the player's progressive-scan component-video and HDMI outputs. Despite the use of 24-bit digital-to-analog converters, the stereo audio outputs produced noise levels reflecting only 15-bit performance, audibly degrading even CD sound quality.

Full lab results on S&V Web site

MUSIC PERFORMANCE The SD-5980 has only analog stereo outputs, so you'll need to use one of its digital audio outputs or the HDMI output to play multichannel Dolby Digital or DTS soundtracks. You'll also want to use a digital connection when playing CDs, since I found the analog output to be noisy. For example, music with a very wide dynamic range — such as practically any Telarc classical or jazz CD — revealed unusually high background hiss.

MOVIE PERFORMANCE Video performance was okay when watching standard interlaced video from the component- and S-video outputs, but when I switched the component-video output to progressive-scan mode, I was disappointed with the results. The resolution of test patterns was obviously softened in the vertical direction, a trait of the Samsung player, too.

To be fair, while this softening was distinct on test patterns, it was tough to see on most of the movies I tried. The eye is amazingly tolerant of loss of detail when a superior picture is not available for side-by-side comparison. But "hard to see" doesn't mean "invisible." In the opening text crawl of *Star Wars II: The Attack of the Clones*, the tiniest stars in the background either disappeared or were not as bright as they should be. (The Panasonic was the only player

in this group to nail that scene.)

Far more common were jagged diagonal edges, a distortion that often occurs when material shot as video has been poorly converted to progressive-scan. These "jaggies" were easily seen on Bruce Springsteen's *Live in New York City* DVD, on close-ups of the silver metal drum rims and on diagonally slanted mike booms.

With all three players, signals fed to the HDMI output is created in two steps: First the standard-definition interlaced video on the DVD (480i) is converted to standard-def progressive-scan (480p). Then that signal is scaled from 480p to the 720p or 1080i HDTV format.

Viewed over my high-end 720p front projector, images delivered by the Toshiba's 720p HDMI output looked essentially the same as those from its progressive-scan component-video output, jaggies and all. The picture actually improved when I sent 480i component-video signals to the projector, which had a superior progressive-scan conversion circuit.

BOTTOM LINE The card slots are cool, and depending on your TV, the SD-5980's HDMI output might provide modest benefit. But its progressive-scan conversion is less than stellar and affects even the HDMI output. If you're looking to wring every last drop of performance from your DVDs, consider looking elsewhere. ▶





WHAT'S STOPPING YOU?

Samsung

A bargain universal player

The Samsung DVD-HD950 bears a strong resemblance to the DVD-HD841 tested in January (available on the **S&V** Web site). Along with the HD950's HDMI output, which replaces the DVI output on the older model, the new player and its remote are essentially identical in layout and features to the HD841, right down to the ability to play both DVD-Audio discs and Super Audio CDs, a great perk for a \$200 player. Undoubtedly the most handsome of these three players, the HD950 sports a black front panel that's a distinct improvement over the earlier silver one and nicely sets off the spectacular white display.

Samsung's remote control is nicely laid out and could have been the most versatile of the three, thanks to its jog dial (for frame stepping) and surrounding shuttle ring (for various slow-motion and scan speeds). Unfortunately, frame stepping and slow motion operate only in the forward direction (even the \$150 Toshiba will do reverse slow motion).

THE SHORT FORM

PLUS

Plays DVD-Audio and SACD.

MINUS

Mediocre progressive-scan video.
Noisy analog audio outputs.
No speaker-distance compensation.

key features

- HDMI output
- Full setup facilities for multichannel analog output of DVD-Audio and SACD
- Plays MP3, WMA, and JPEG on CD-R

test bench

Video performance measurements showed a falloff of vertical resolution on the progressive-scan and HDMI outputs. The background noise levels of the multichannel analog audio outputs limited sound quality to approximately 15-bit resolution, or less than CD quality.

Full lab results on **S&V** Web site

SETUP Unlike the more spartan Toshiba, the Samsung's DVD-Audio and SACD capabilities bring with it a full set of multichannel analog outputs and their accompanying setup routines. But like the HD841, the DVD-HD950 provides only for speaker "size" selection and level balancing. There's no speaker-distance compensation, which I'd have thought was required even for Dolby Digital and DTS playback. This means that sonic imaging and front/surround balance may not be optimal when using the multichannel analog outputs, depending on your speakers and how they are arranged.

As with the Toshiba, you should use a digital output for the best sound. The Samsung has both coax and optical audio outs for Dolby Digital, DTS, MP3/WMA, and CD signals, as well as the HDMI output, which can also carry multichannel DVD-Audio signals. The player won't deliver SACD signals in digital form (this is true of almost all SACD players).

MUSIC PERFORMANCE Unfortunately, when I used the multichannel analog audio outputs to play some SACD and DVD-Audio discs, the music was

marred by a surprisingly high level of background noise. Put in technical terms, the Samsung delivers only 15 bits or so of dynamic range from its 24-bit converters. For example, the added hiss squelched the explosive dynamics of Paavo Jarvi's reading of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* (Telarc SACD) and slackened the musical tension of the soft passages before the violence of the Sacrificial Dance erupts.

MOVIE PERFORMANCE All of my comments for the Toshiba player's video performance apply here, too. The two players looked about the same onscreen and measured almost identically on the test bench. Using the progressive-scan component-video and HDMI outputs, I observed the same fall-off in vertical resolution on movies (producing the same muted star fields in *Star Wars*) and the same trouble with jagged diagonals on concert DVDs and other programs that originated on video. In the end, the HDMI output failed to provide a superior picture on my projector, even compared with its component output switched to *interlaced* mode.

BOTTOM LINE Although its video quality is average, the main appeal of the DVD-HD950 is the surround sound music capabilities you get for \$200. And having the HDMI output to convey DVD-Audio signals digitally is a definite plus.



Panasonic

A superior performer



With Panasonic's DVD-S77 we reach the big time, not only in features but also in performance. For \$100 more than the Toshiba you'd expect quite a few more capabilities, and the DVD-S77 won't disappoint you. It will play DVD-Audio discs as well as DVD-RW discs recorded in the editable VR mode and even DVD-RAM discs, which the other two can't play. The only obvious omission is SACD playback, which keeps the Panasonic shy of being a true universal player — too bad considering what it does right. The remote, while lacking the Samsung's jog/shuttle dials, does allow frame stepping, slow motion, and fast scanning in either direction, making precision cueing very easy.

THE SHORT FORM

PLUS

Superior progressive-scan video.
Excellent DVD-Audio sound quality.
Many user adjustments.
Plays most major disc types.

MINUS

No SACD playback.

key features

- HDMI output
- Plays DVD-Audio, DVD-RAM, and DVD-RW VR-mode discs
- Plays MP3, WMA, and JPEG pictures on CD-R

test bench

Vertical-resolution test patterns came through with flying colors on all outputs, and jaggies were notably absent on video-originated material in progressive-scan operation. Audio noise levels were low for CD and movie soundtrack playback and even lower for DVD-Audio.

Full lab results on S&V Web site

SETUP The Panasonic has full bass-management facilities for its multichannel analog outputs, which give you all the tools you need for optimum sound quality, including speaker-distance compensation. It also has a raft of video adjustments and processing options not available on the other players, including presets for image "enhancement," basic picture controls (including gamma), video noise reduction, and even a choice of HDMI "color space." Most of these can be left in their default settings or played with at your leisure.

MUSIC PERFORMANCE For once, a relatively inexpensive player can actually produce sound quality from a DVD-Audio disc that's better than a CD's (aside from one being multichannel and the other only stereo). While its measured background noise levels aren't the lowest I've seen, the DVD-S77 was quieter with DVD-Audio discs than even theoretically perfect CD playback — as it should be, given the lower noise floor of the DVD-Audio format.

MOVIE PERFORMANCE Panasonic has long held an edge over the competition in its processing to convert interlaced to progressive-scan video. Unlike the Toshiba and Samsung, the DVD-S77 retains full verti-

cal resolution for its progressive-scan output and doesn't generate jaggies on diagonal edges (an all-too-common problem among the many DVD players I've tested). The player passes this superior performance to its HDMI output. As with the other players, the Panasonic's HDMI and progressive-scan outputs yielded identical-looking images from my front projector. Yet both produced better-looking video than the Toshiba or the Samsung players. The DVD-S77's video prowess came through vividly in the *Monsters, Inc.* DVD. Sulley's fuzzy hair had the kind of life-like detail (both horizontally and vertically) that's supposed to be the hallmark of progressive-scan reproduction, but is all too rare.

BOTTOM LINE I can't say whether you'd get this same video quality from Panasonic's lower-priced players, since good progressive-scan conversion is a costly feature to build into in an inexpensive component. But I'm really glad that the company made the effort here. Sure, Panasonic's DVD-S77 costs two-thirds more than the Toshiba and a quarter more than the Samsung. But that buys you some great features and versatility as well as truly superior audio and video performance. The DVD-S77 can even hold its own against many of the high-end DVD players I've tested, and in comparison with them it's a genuine bargain. **S&V**





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LG

LRY-517 DVD Recorder and VCR

Last time I checked, there were five different recordable-DVD disc types — a potential compatibility catastrophe. Wouldn't it be great if someone invented a player that could play all kinds of DVDs? Even better, what if it was also a recorder?

LG, apparently able to read my mind, created the LRY-517, billed as the world's first "universal" DVD recorder. Besides being the first to both play and record DVD-RAMs along with DVD-R/RWs, DVD+R/RWs, and even DVD+R DLs (double layer), it can also play DVD-Video discs, audio CDs, and CD-R/RWs as well as read JPEG, WMA, MP3, and DivX files. Wait! There's more! The deck boasts slots for eight different memory-card types and includes a four-head VCR. Whew. All in all, this recorder is about as universal as it gets. Well, not quite — it can't record to CD-R or -RW.

The LRY-517 is as austere-looking as a Quaker on Sunday, so it won't win any awards for industrial design. Its front panel is remarkably plain. Two loading slots, one for disc and one for tape, stare down at you. A lower panel flips down to reveal — most notably — a FireWire (IEEE 1394) input that lets you quickly jack in a DV camcorder and dump your home movies to tape or disc. Excellent.

The feature set is sparse, but with a few niceties like an AutoPlay mode for DVDs that automatically starts movie playback, skipping the menus and annoying trailers. Another nice touch: the menu for your discs shows up to nine thumbnail images containing the opening scene for each chapter. Click on a thumbnail, and the scene starts playing in low-res inside the thumbnail. Once you've seen enough to know you've got the right chapter, you can select it for full-screen playback.

RECORDING & EDITING

Of course, the crowd pleaser is the DVD recording capability. Never burned a DVD before? Relax. This player makes it super simple: Drop in a blank DVD, select a recording mode, and hit the record button. That's it.

There are the usual four recording modes — XP, SP, LP, EP — and a standard 4.7-GB disc yields recording times of 1, 2, 4, and 6 hours, respectively. Recording times are approximate because the deck uses variable bit-rate compression, so capacity depends on what's being recorded. The recorder's real perk is its readiness to dump bits to any DVD disc you feed it. I particularly like that it accommodates DVD-RAM discs because they allow simultaneous recording and playback — you can start watching the beginning of a title while

the rest is still recording (and you can even monitor the progress of the recording as a picture in picture). Killer.

As you delve deeper into DVD recording, the LRY-517 will accommodate your greater sophistication. For example, you can format DVD-RW discs in either Video or VR mode. The Video mode creates discs that are playable on conventional DVD players after the disc is finalized. The downside is that you're limited in terms of editing. Conversely, the VR mode allows extensive editing, but discs can be played only on other decks with a VR mode.

Speaking of editing, that's one of the most important features that a DVD recorder can provide. It's easy to dump programs onto a disc, but you'll soon want to organize and edit them into more conveniently watchable forms. In VR mode, the LRY-517 lets you either



PHOTOS BY TONY CORDOZA

WHAT WE THINK

A recorder that burns to most any DVD disc or VHS tape, but falls shy of its promise of universality.

THE SHORT FORM

PLUS

Widest disc compatibility of any recorder.

Simultaneous recording and playback with DVD-RAM.

Easy tape-to-disc dubbing.

Flexible editing features.

MINUS

Can't record on CD-R/RW discs.

Editing features depend on disc type.

No commercial skip.

No program guide or IR emitter.

edit the content directly, or edit a playlist that determines how the content is played, leaving the video itself unaltered. You can delete an original or playlist title/chapter, delete a part of a title, name a title, divide one title into two, combine two chapters into one, rearrange the order of playlist chapters, hide a title/chapter, overwrite a previously written title, and protect a title against accidental erasure. Various editing functions, however, depend on the type of disc used. For example, you can delete part of a title only on DVD-RW (VR) and DVD-RAM discs, move a playlist chapter only on DVD-RW (VR), and divide a title only on DVD+RW discs. Ultra confusing — and not quite universal.

I was bummed that the player lacks a commercial-skip button and that you can't move data from memory cards to disc or tape. On the upside, you *can* manually delete commercials from a recording by searching for start and end points, or designate commercials as chapters and delete those chapters — tedious, for sure, but better than nothing.

SETUP Setting up the recorder was trivial. I connected the output of my cable box to the recorder's antenna input, connected its component-video output to my Samsung DLP HDTV, and connected its optical digital audio output to my Denon receiver. Wiring completed, I enabled progressive-scan, selected the cable-TV band on the recorder's built-in tuner, and unleashed auto-channel setting. Piece of cake. But — and it's a major letdown — the recorder has no electronic channel guide. All time-shifting must be done by programming the recorder to turn on and off at specific times — as with an old VCR. And it also lacks an IR emitter to change channels automatically on a cable or satellite box, so if you use one of those you can't record multiple programs from different channels without changing channels manually.

RECORD/PLAYBACK PERFORMANCE I burned all kinds of discs, verifying that the recorder really does handle both + and - DVDs as well as double-layer DVD+Rs, which played fine but occasionally stuttered or skipped during layer changes. As you'd expect, picture quality has nothing to do with disc type (they're just bit buckets), but it has everything to do with bit rate. For example, I recorded an episode of ABC's *Lost*, a prime-time soap opera apparently inspired by *Lord of the Flies*. The XP mode looked as good as the broadcast feed, with sharp picture quality. Details were clearly visible even in visually complex, quick-edit flashbacks of the plane crash. In SP mode, still scenes weren't quite as sharp looking, and

details, such as rain falling in a tropical downpour, were slightly blurred by MPEG motion artifacts, but the picture was still very good.

The LP mode was watchable, but the picture was very soft, and MPEG encoding artifacts such as blocking were plainly visible — for example, details on the sand beach became homogenous blobs. The picture was worse than a high-quality VHS recording. And the 6-hour EP mode looked terrible, like something you'd see streaming over the Internet. Moving objects, even slow pans, were completely surrounded (or obscured) by mosquito-noise artifacts. I'd use this mode only if I was down to my last minutes on my last disc. In all modes, sound quality was quite good (for off-air dubs) and, of course, stereo only.

I spent some nostalgia time with the VCR — no problems. Nice to have around for playing old tapes, or to make a recording if you run out of discs. I was pleased that I could dub from tape to disc, and vice versa, but only at real-time speed. You can't make tape or DVD dubs of any copy-protected DVDs or tapes.

BOTTOM LINE Diversity is a good thing, usually, but not always. When all these different recordable-DVD formats hit the market simultaneously, some people predicted Armageddon, or at least a bunch of frustrated consumers. In fact, it wasn't the end of the world, but it was a pain. LG's LRY-517 cuts through all the hassle and just deals with it — recording and playing regardless of disc type — with the caveat that its editing capabilities depend on the kind of disc you use. Throw in extraordinary memory-card compatibility, a DV input, a VCR, and you've got something happening. Okay, so, there's no hard disk. And A/V snobs wouldn't be caught dead with a VHS deck in their stack. But there's no denying that this flexible component does more than most other recorders.

S&V



In XP mode, a recording of *Lost* looked as good as the broadcast feed.

key features

- Records and plays DVD-R/RW, -RAM, +R/RW, and +R DL (double layer)
- Plays DVD-Video, audio CD, CD-R/RW, JPEG, WMA, MP3, and DivX v. 3/4/5
- Memory slots for SD, MMC, MS, MS Pro, SMC, xD, MD, and CF
- Built-in VCR
- **front-panel** composite- and S-video inputs, stereo audio input, DV input
- **back-panel** component-, composite-, and S-video outputs; composite-video input; 2 stereo audio outputs and 1 input; optical and coaxial digital audio outputs

test bench

The LG's progressive component output was typical for a DVD player, which means good on film-based material but with jagged diagonal edges on video-based programs. Vertical progressive resolution was fine, but some test patterns produced very jerky motion rendition (not visible in movies).

As usual, recording performance was excellent at the two top recording modes (XP and SP), and static resolution test patterns looked unusually sharp in the LP and EP modes. However, the typical blocking and mosquito noise kicked in as soon as there was significant image motion.

— David Ranada

Full lab results on [S&V Web site](#)

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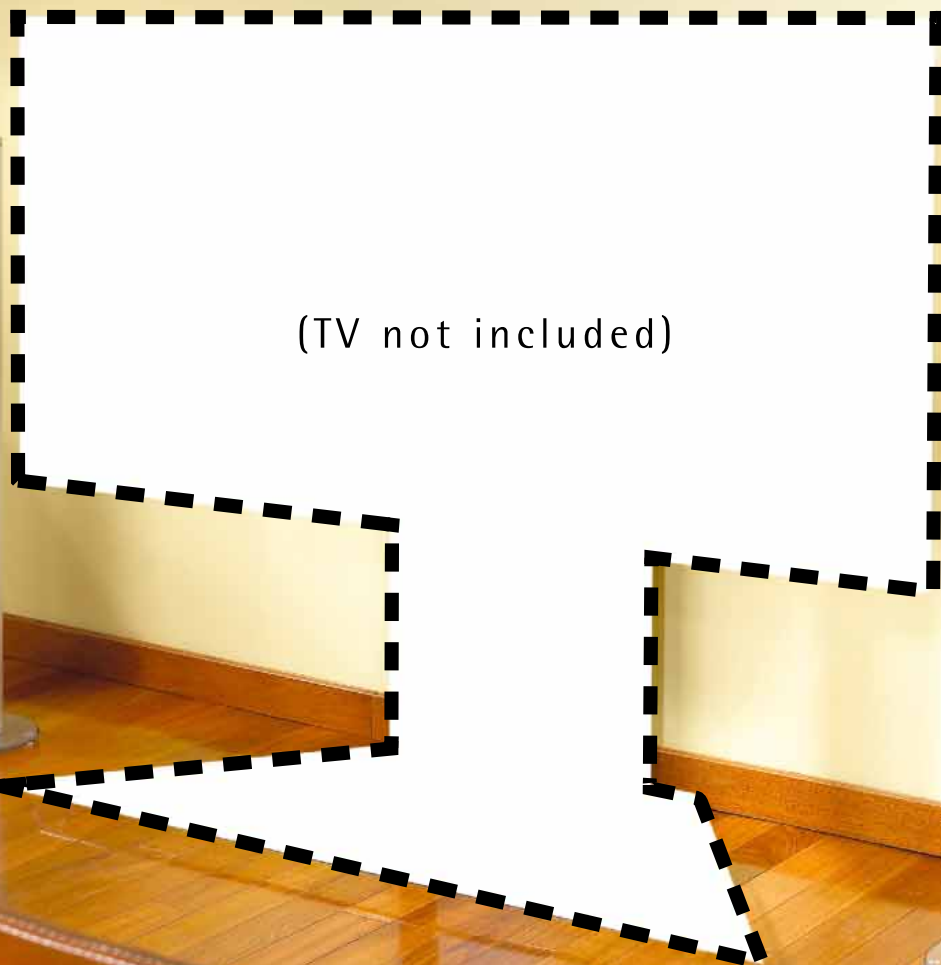
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Yamaha

RX-V657 Digital Surround Receiver

Starved for new music? For talk (left, right, or center)? Sports? Comedy? Weather and traffic? Satellite radio delivers all these and more by the dozen. Yamaha is among the first A/V receiver makers to bring satellite radio home, via a new XM-ready line that includes the RX-V657 model here.

The RX-V657 packs all the usual A/V receiver goods, including seven-channel power, plus one subtle but critical addition: a tiny port on its back accepts an antenna/tuner called XM Connect & Play. So far the only one available is the \$50 Audiovox CMP1000, but others may join the party later, and XM-ready devices like boomboxes and clock radios can also employ them. Plug one of these pocket-size pods into the new Yamaha and you get 150-plus digital channels — all nicely integrated into the receiver's display, tuning, and preset-memory functions. Such leading-edge stuff usually reaches me first in a big-buck flagship receiver. Refreshingly, the RX-V657 is a \$550 list price model that's comparatively compact and simple (for an A/V receiver!) — all pluses in my book.

SETUP Setting up the Connect & Play option couldn't be much simpler. The antenna/tuner (see photo at right) is a clamshell arrangement about the size of a moderate quahog, or roughly 3 inches square. I set this atop the receiver and plugged its captive, 30-foot cord into the tiny XM jack, aiming the up-slanted antenna through a window more or less toward XM's satellite in the southwest sky.

WHAT WE THINK

A solid performer that seamlessly blends XM satellite radio with Yamaha's excellent surround performance and adaptability.

To my surprise, XM came right up even though signal strength on the Yamaha's onscreen meter was only 32%. Fine-aiming raised this to 45% to 50% with no dropouts, so I'd bet most users will have little trouble acquiring an adequate XM signal. Of course, you'll also have to activate your XM subscription by dialing a toll-free number or visiting XM's Web site with your credit card and the registration number from your

Connect & Play unit. The service costs \$12.95 a month, less if you buy by the year or add multiple receivers.

Apart from adding XM, hookup involved the usual audio and video connections. There are only two component-video inputs, though, and no DVI or HDMI connectors.

The Yamaha also boasts an automatic setup routine, which uses a small microphone to determine speaker "size" and distance from the listening position, and to set the bass crossover frequency and speaker levels. It worked well enough: checked with my hand-



PHOTOS BY TONY CORDOZA

THE SHORT FORM

PLUS

Well-integrated XM Radio option.
Fine performance with broad selection of surround modes.
Simple, easy-to-use remote control.

MINUS

Only two component-video inputs.
No DVI or HDMI connectors.



A Coldplay session on XM Live helped sample the music surround modes.

key features

- 95 watts x 7 channels
- Automatic setup
- Video upconversion (composite to S-video and S-video to component)
- 14 proprietary DSP surround modes, including virtual surround and headphone surround
- 9 selectable crossover frequencies, 40 to 200 Hz (common to all channels set to "small")
- Back surround speaker outputs reassignable to Yamaha-specific Presence (front surround) outputs
- Zone 2 audio capability (can reassign Back Surround/Presence speaker outputs to Zone 2)
- 8-component preprogrammed system remote

test bench

The Yamaha delivered plenty of power at its 8-ohm speaker setting, well exceeding its rating with two-channels driven. A modest and unusual error was detected in the performance of the digital-to-analog converter with uncompressed stereo signals from CDs, but this didn't seem to produce any audible effects in music listening.

Full lab results on [S&V Web site](#)

held meter, speaker levels were within ± 1 dB of the ideal setting.

MUSIC PERFORMANCE

Yamaha has been perfecting its music-surround technology longer than any other major brand, and the RX-V657 shows off this heritage. There are several proprietary modes and variants for music and movies, with hardly a dud among the lot. Of course, you also get Dolby Pro Logic II/IIx (often my choice for making surround sound from stereo material) as well as the full DTS palette.

You're likely to find something that will believably, or at least entertainingly, enhance any sort of music or movie soundtrack.

During my test, XM hosted a Coldplay session on XM Live (Channel 200) as part of its "Artists Confidential" series. The up-close, in-studio sound provided a good baseline for sampling the RX-V657's music-surround modes. After a bit of fiddling among user-adjustable parameters like Liveness and Room Size, I found that the Bottom Line mode (named after the famous, recently closed New York City club)

produced a very convincing and musical in-the-room effect that was still reasonably natural-sounding on the interview parts of the program — no small feat.

Close listening to XM's fairly deep roster of jazz channels and its depressingly thin classical choices demonstrated that XM can, in fact, sound very good indeed, given material that doesn't obviously expose the vulnerabilities of its data-compression scheme (MP3 and its cousins suffer the same). A performance of Copland's *Rodeo* on Channel 110 sounded big, clear, and sharply defined in both plain stereo and DPL IIx Music. Aside from a very occasional "swirly" texture on soft strings and a slightly "flat" tonality to cymbal crashes, I was hard pressed to tell XM from CD here, though with things like solo piano the difference was more obvious.

MOVIE PERFORMANCE

Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow's soundtrack is fast becoming a favorite. If you love full-range, room-zooming effects, hyper-active surround channels, and lots of big-bass moments, and don't mind a little silliness (okay — a lot of silliness), check it out.

The Yamaha acquitted

itself with honors on this stiff test, never exposing any shortage of power in 6.1-channel playback even with my moderately watt-hungry speakers. It preserved excellent dynamic impact, clarity, and depth in even the busiest scenes, such as the attack of the flappy things in Chapter 6. The RX-V657 also supplies several surround alternatives for movie sound. Its Movie Theater-Adventure setting, suitably adjusted, produced a more spacious, widely spread ambience than straight Dolby Digital during a scene in an echoey giant hanger, though at the cost of a slight twanginess that was occasionally audible.

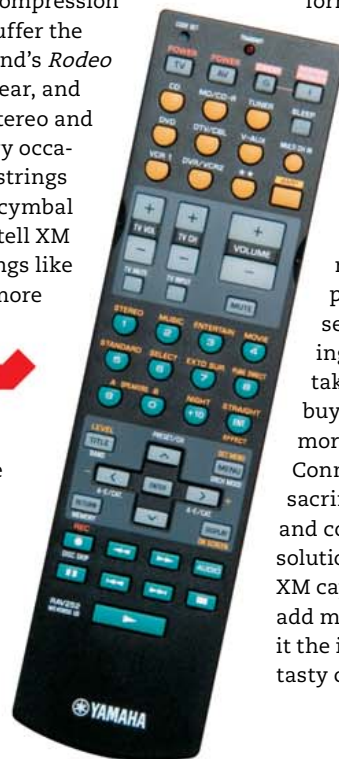
OPERATION

Yamaha supplies a basic but well-thought-out full-system remote control. It requires some switching back and forth between modes (for instance, AMP and DVD) in everyday use, but its logical groupings of keys in different colors and shapes is intuitive and pleasant to use. I also liked the straightforward onscreen menus — too bad they're supplied in only standard-def (480i) video. When watching high-def sources or progressive-scan DVD (480p format), you have to wait for

your TV to resync every time you call up or close an onscreen menu.

BOTTOM LINE

Take away XM, and what you have here is a very capable, nicely balanced, midprice A/V receiver with plenty of power and a superb selection of excellent-sounding surround options. But why take it away? Sure, you could buy an XM portable for little more than the cost of the XM Connect & Play add-on, but you'll sacrifice the integrated display and control that makes Yamaha's solution so elegant. The RX-V657's XM capability doesn't appear to add much to the price, so consider it the icing on an already very tasty cake.



S&V



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Pioneer

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SkipJam

iMedia A/V Distribution System

What *time-shifting* was to the VCR generation, *place-shifting* is becoming to the home-network-enabled. Extending personal entertainment to every room in your home is the mission of SkipJam, a company whose main product is the iMedia Center, a box you can attach to multiple A/V components including your cable or satellite receiver, home theater receiver, DVD player, and TV. SkipJam's promise is that virtually anything you can play or show in one room — whether a live or recorded TV program, a movie, a song, or a photo — should be accessible in any other room independently of where the content is received or stored. As a bonus, if you have broadband available at a remote computer, you'll be able to watch whatever you'd be able to see at home. With assistance from SkipJam's installers, I prepared to see how well this ambitious product delivered.

SETUP The iMedia Center (\$799) assumes you have an Ethernet network in place. The encoder/player can switch up to four analog video devices (via four composite- and three S-video inputs), up to six analog audio devices (via stereo inputs), and up to four digital audio devices (via two coaxial and two optical inputs). While HDTV resolution is not supported, analog TV and FM tuners are built in, and you get two remotes: a rechargeable RF (radio-frequency) controller, which has a helpful LCD screen and can be operated through walls, and a conventional infrared one.

You also get three dual-headed infrared (IR) emitters (for controlling such components as an audio receiver, cable box, or DVD player), an Ethernet cable (for attaching the iMedia Center to your network), a composite video/stereo cable, and a CD-ROM containing SkipJam iMedia for Windows. This software enables you to tune, watch, and record channels available on your cable box from a computer in another room or across the planet.

For our test, SkipJam provided a second iMedia Center for a remote room so that signals from cable and satellite receivers and a DVD

player located there could be made available elsewhere. However, for a second or third room, you could get by with an iMedia Player (\$499), which has audio and video outputs but no inputs. Skip-

Jam also offers the iMedia Audio Player (\$299), with audio output only (no video and no inputs) and the iMedia Audio Player Pro (\$499) for in-wall installation.

Unlike most media servers, the SkipJam does not come with storage. All your music, photos, videos, and TV shows can either be parked on the hard drive of any computer on the network or directed to a Network Attached Storage (NAS) device dedicated only to file-sharing. For our review, SkipJam provided an off-the-shelf Maxtor NAS. About the size of a VHS videocassette, it stores files on a 300-gigabyte hard-disk drive and plugs directly into an Ethernet jack. The \$250 drive also buffers live TV (the default is a half hour). SkipJam provides a free TV program guide that downloads listings.

SkipJam's installers spent the better part of a day resolving network issues for us. They replaced our misconfigured router, set up IR codes, attached sticky IR emitters to all our

"I liked the sense of control I had playing any A/V device in any room."

WHAT WE THINK

Versatility squared. But you'll need a pro to install this A/V-sharing system.

THE SHORT FORM

PLUS

Vast flexibility for moving A/V content around your home or the Internet.

Relies on inexpensive network-attached storage.

Free program guide for recording TV shows.

MINUS

Complex setup.

No support for HDTV.

cable boxes, receivers, and DVD players, and put in an IR blaster that turned on our TV. An antenna on the iMedia Center makes it look Wi-Fi-ready but is actually for the two-way RF remote. (If you misplace the remote, you can get it to beep three times from a button on the iMedia Center.) For the best video performance, SkipJam advises against using Wi-Fi.

PERFORMANCE

After a lot of hand-holding by the installers, I was able to get the iMedia Center to jump through hoops. Though the TV would sometimes turn off when the Center turned on my receiver, and the Maxtor NAS had to be rebooted more than once, I did grow to like the sense of control I had playing any A/V device in any room and experiencing all my entertainment without leaving the couch. (I was even able to view and operate a computer running in another room from the TV.)

I could also change channels on a cable box in another room and saw no degradation in picture quality. After recording *Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle* from cable to the NAS, I started the movie up, pressed pause, then "Follow me" and

selected another room destination. When I entered the other room, I pressed play on the remote, and the movie continued. This also worked for music. When I watched a movie from a DVD player, the SkipJam would stream it directly to the other room or play it in both rooms.

You can record a TV show using SkipJam's program guide or by manually setting the time and channel. Unfortunately, there are no grid-type listings. (You still have access to your cable or satellite guide for that.) SkipJam offers four MPEG-2 and three MPEG-4 compression modes. (You'll want to use MPEG-2 if you plan to burn a DVD in your PC.) The best quality in each of the compression schemes approached that of DVD, but MPEG-4 uses about half the disk space. You can skip forward 30 seconds or back 10 seconds.

There are three reverse and three fast-forward speeds (you can scan through a 1-hour recording in 85 seconds), one slow-motion speed, and frame advance. One thing that needs refining is that the screen goes black for a second upon coming out of any fast-forward speed. Also, the live TV buffer isn't automatic — you have to pause your viewing session at least once to activate it. But unlike TiVo and other self-contained video hard-disk recorders, the SkipJam can replay anything you've watched in the last 2 hours even after you've switched to another channel.

As a multiroom audio server, SkipJam aggregates songs stored on the NAS and all the computers on

your network. It plays the MP3, WMA, AAC, WAV, PCM, FLAC, and OGG formats, including music purchased from Napster and iTunes with digital rights-management wrappers. I liked the Play Anything random-play mode and the ability to run a slideshow or watch TV with music in the background.

The RF remote, meant to replace every other remote in your home, was pretty easy to use. The Home and Back keys keep you from getting lost, and you can navigate from its LCD screen while in secondary rooms.

By accessing cable boxes in either of the other rooms, I could watch TV in a third room on a networked computer that was loaded only with SkipJam's software — no PC tuner card needed. I could also record what I was watching to the computer's hard drive and play it back with Windows Media Player.

By installing the SkipJam software on any PC in a remote location with broadband Internet access, I was able to control my cable box and watch programs. This means that no matter where you are, if you have broadband access you can watch anything you'd see at home, including local sports. Unfortunately, the picture quality was like watching a worn VHS tape. But still . . .

BOTTOM LINE

If you have a network in place, SkipJam is one of the most adaptable systems available for distributing your cable or satellite TV channels, recorded shows, movies, music, videos, and photos throughout your home. Its hardware components are less expensive than other whole-house systems, but it's a complex product to get running and requires a professional installer with strong computer networking skills. You *may* even need more than one visit to tweak the system as you learn the many ways to use it. That said, the remarkable freedom it provides makes SkipJam's steep learning curve well worth the climb. **S&V**



Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle faithfully followed me from room to room.

key features

- Streams content from cable or satellite box, DVD player, and other A/V devices to your home network for viewing or listening in other rooms
- RF remote with LCD that doubles as a 2.4-GHz cordless phone
- Lets you watch your home TV from remote locations via the Internet
- Instant replay of live broadcasts, commercial skip
- Unlimited capacity

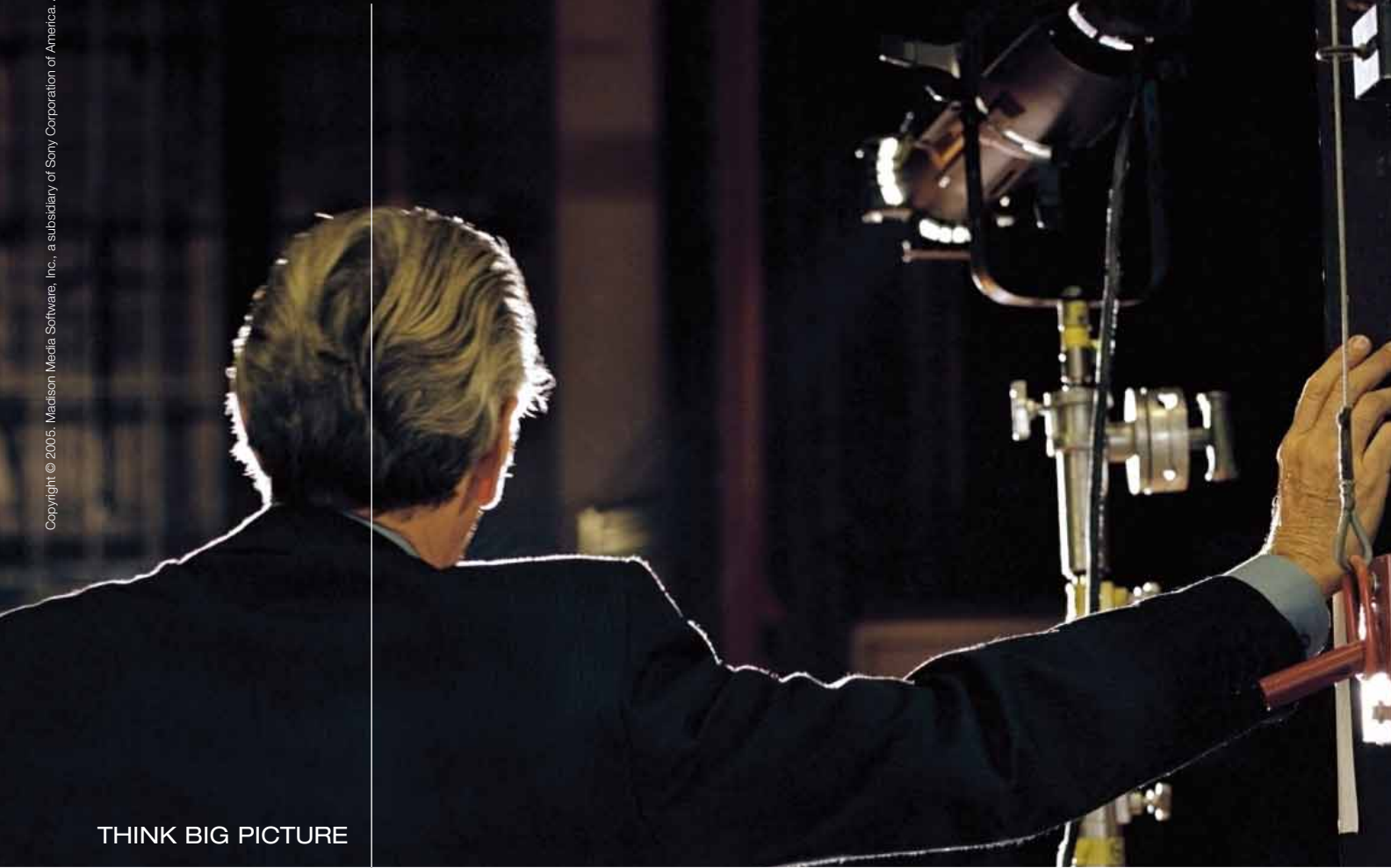


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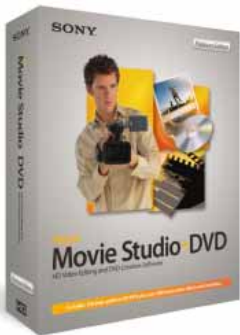
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We live in an iPod-centric world. You have one, I have one, my wife has one, and it's probably just a matter of time before my preschool-age daughter wants one. And while many people now listen to music exclusively on their iPods, a slew of mostly portable iPod "speaker" add-ons have sprung up to let them enjoy tunes when they're not in transit. The problem with most of these is that they sound bad.

That was my thinking, at least, before I heard the Klipsch iFi system. Klipsch took the step here of using real satellite speakers and a powered subwoofer — a radical idea in the world of iAudio. The silvery speakers match the sleek aluminum design of recent top-of-the-line Macintosh computers and come with a sturdy dock for your iPod, iPod photo, or iPod mini that connects to the subwoofer by a supplied cable. An iPodish scroll wheel lets you adjust volume, and you can also use it to adjust the bass after pressing a button labeled Subwoofer. There's a mute/standby button and a stereo minijack input on the back for plugging in a CD player or whatever.

SETUP AND OPERATION The iFi isn't an all-in-one thing that you just plunk down on a kitchen counter. It's a sub/sat speaker system with 200 watts total power — the sub's built-in amp also powers the sats, and

the system comes with speaker cables. You set up the iFi as you would regular speakers, taking care to position the satellites for wide imaging and the subwoofer for the most satisfying bass. Big plus: the satellites' swiveling-ball attachment and base plate can be rotated for a wall-mount installation.

I found immediate use for the iFi alongside my computer. After positioning the sats about 3 feet apart to form an equilateral triangle with my head, I stowed the sub next to the wall under my desk and plugged my Mac's audio output into a second minijack audio input on the sub's back panel. Unlike the dock's aux input, which mutes the iPod when it detects a signal, this one mixes your computer's audio with the iPod. The idea is to let you hear "You've got mail!" without interrupting the music.

The sats worked well, delivering a spacious stereo image with good detail. And balancing the bass didn't take long. The process was helped along by an LED bar on the dock that lit up to indicate both subwoofer and overall system level. The iFi's small, lozenge-shaped RF (radio-frequency) remote control lets you pause, play, and skip tracks as well as adjust volume — handy if you're using the iFi as your main stereo system.

PERFORMANCE With my 10-GB iPod plugged into the dock, the iFi's performance

turned out to be a real revelation. Songs I'd downloaded from the iTunes store and heard only with earphones sounded startlingly full, detailed, and lifelike. Played on the iFi, the sunny Britpop of the Delays' "Long Time Coming," for example, turned out to have shimmering layers of percussion and vocals that I hadn't previously noticed. And unlike most other iPod speakers I've tested, the iFi didn't sound harsh when I cranked the volume up.

The iFi sub lacked serious low end (waddaya want for \$400?), but the bass from its 8-inch woofer wasn't boomy. On "If You Knew," a live Neko Case track from her CD *The Tigers Have Spoken*, the bass was tight and tuneful. And both the reverb-laden guitar and Neko's Patsy Cline-like belting had a smooth, liquid quality that was easy on the ears.

BOTTOM LINE I'm glad to know that people who rely solely on their iPods and computers for music listening now have a high-fidelity alternative to the mostly bad speaker solutions out there. Klipsch's iFi is the real deal. If you're seeking a good, inexpensive way to extend your iPod into your living space, look no further. **S&V**

THE SHORT FORM

PLUS

Great sound for iPod speakers. Finish mirrors high-end Macs.

MINUS

None to speak of.

key features

- iPod dock with separate sub/system volume controls
- RF remote control with 100-foot range
- **Satellite** ¾-in tweeter, 3½-in midrange; **subwoofer** 8-in driver, 200-watt amp
- Rotating base and wall-mount options
- Dual aux audio inputs



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HDTVs

FLAT-PANEL

Panasonic Onyx TH-42XVS30U
42-in plasma
\$6,500, MAY 2005

Not the cheapest 42-inch plasma HDTV, but stunning to look at in every way. panasonic.com

Pioneer PDP-4350HD
43-in plasma
\$5,000, MAY 2005

Style, great features, and a clear, natural picture further cement Pioneer as a plasma leader. pioneerelectronics.com

Dell W4200 42-in plasma
\$2,599, see page 45

Surprisingly strong performance and a good basic feature set make it a great bargain. dell.com



DENON

REAR-PROJECTION TVs

Sony Qualia 006 70-in SXR
\$13,000, MAY 2005

This high-end set featuring 1080p-resolution LCoS technology is simply the best RPTV we've tested. sony.com/qualia

RCA Scenium Profiles
HD61THW263 61-in DLP
\$7,999, DECEMBER 2004

Excellent performance in an unusually trim DLP projector, just 7 inches deep. rca.com



SONY

Mitsubishi WD-52627 52-in DLP
\$3,699, see page 38

1080p resolution, a super-smooth picture, deep blacks, and vibrant color create a winning combo. mitsubishi-tv.com



ESCIENT

FRONT PROJECTORS

Sharp XV-Z2000 DLP
\$4,000, JULY/AUGUST 2005

Fine HDTV home theater performance with the benefits of DLP at a sensible price. sharpusa.com

Sony Cineza VPL-HS51 LCD
\$3,500, APRIL 2005

There's terrific value in this LCD projector that delivers great HDTV and progressive-scan DVD images. sonystyle.com



DEFINITIVE TECHNOLOGY

DVD PLAYERS/RECORDERS

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\$1,499, JANUARY 2005
Superb video upconversion and onboard bass management for all formats. usa.denon.com

Lite-On LVW-5045
DVD/hard-disk recorder

\$399, JULY/AUGUST 2005
Ease of use and convenient high-speed dubbing from hard drive to DVD make this deck a winner. liteonamerica.com

Panasonic DVD-S77 HDMI player

\$250, see page 51
Progressive-scan video that's a cut above typical DVD players. panasonic.com

Panasonic DMR-ES10 recorder

\$200, JUNE 2005
An entry-level recorder with solid video quality and good editing chops. panasonic.com

NETWORK A/V

Kaleidescape movie server

\$22,500 and up, FEB/MARCH 2004
Now in its second generation and still the ultimate hard-disk movie player. kaleidescape.com

Xperinet Polaris video/music server

\$6,995, JUNE 2005
Hard-disk-based movie and music distribution in a "poor man's Kaleidescape." xperinet.com

Escient FireBall DVDM-300
music server/DVD controller

\$4,999, JUNE 2005
A proven hard-disk music system with flawless DVD changer control. escient.com

A/V RECEIVERS

Denon AVR-5805

\$6,000, MAY 2005
10-channel behemoth with high-end sound and truly amazing multiroom flexibility. usa.denon.com

Onkyo TX-NR1000

\$5,000, JUNE 2005
Excellent performance, sophisticated features, and a future-proof modular chassis. onkyousa.com

Yamaha RX-Z9

\$4,499, MAY 2004
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Denon AVR-3805

\$1,199, JULY/AUGUST 2004
A versatile mix of high power, thoughtful features, and performance. usa.denon.com

Yamaha RX-V657

\$550, see page 61
Integrated XM satellite radio tuning, good sound, plus Yamaha's extensive surround mode options. yamaha.com/yec

Marantz SR4500

\$430, JULY/AUGUST 2005
Strong power reserves and some sophisticated user adjustments belie its low price. marantz.com

Pioneer VSX-815

\$365, JULY/AUGUST 2005
Easy auto setup stands out at this price and combines with solid audio performance. pioneerelectronics.com

HOME THEATER SPEAKERS

MartinLogan Fresco

\$5,970, JANUARY 2004
Turns ears and eyes with the spacious sonics from its dipole drivers and its sexy good looks. martinlogan.com

B&W FPM

\$4,650, JANUARY 2004
The Flat Panel Monitor system delivers high-end sound from speakers just 4 inches deep. bwspeakers.com

Definitive Technology Mythos

\$3,694, JANUARY 2004
DefTech invented the high-performance "plasma speaker" with this slim, aluminum-enclosure system. definitivetech.com

Atlantic Technology FS-3200

\$2,465 to \$2,660, APRIL 2005
Most of the performance of AT's 4200 system in a cheaper, flat-screen-friendly package. atlanticttechnology.com

Infinity TSS-4000/1100

\$2,394, see page 77
An all-around great-sounding and good-looking on-wall/freestanding system. infinitysystems.com

Great theater deserves a great setting.

Magnepan Magneplanar MC-1

\$2,250, APRIL 2005

Thin dipole-panel speakers that deliver remarkably three-dimensional and accurate sound. magnepan.com

Energy Take Series

\$2,225, JULY/AUGUST 2005

Extends the high-value tradition set by the original Take 5 series in a stylish new design. energy-speakers.com

Definitive Technology

Mythos Gem

\$2,048, JUNE 2005

Mythos junior (see above) at an affordable price, with a kick-ass mini-sub thrown in. definitivetech.com

Paradigm Cinema 110

\$800, APRIL 2005

An excellent-sounding and stylish compact system with dipole surrounds — a rarity at this price. paradigm.com

HSU Research Ventriloquist

VT-12/STF-1

\$500, OCTOBER 2004

Cleverly designed 6.1-channel system that represents the pinnacle of value. hsuresearch.com

MUSIC PORTABLES & EXTRAS

Klipsch iFi iPod sound system

\$400, see page 68

The best-sounding iPod speaker add-on we've tried to date. klipsch.com/ifi

iriver H10 portable music player

\$250, JULY/AUGUST 2005

At the price of an iPod Mini, the 5-GB H10 throws in a color display, photo playback, FM radio, and a recorder.

iriveramerica.com

Yahoo Music Unlimited download service

\$6.99 a month, JULY/AUGUST 2005

It won't do iPod, but it's the best deal on the Web thanks to the low price and a feature-laden interface. yahoo.com

ADD-ONS

Polk Audio XRT12

XM satellite radio tuner

\$330, FEB/MARCH 2005

Notable sound quality and a TV output for viewing channel data make this a worthy add-on. polkaudio.com

Logitech Harmony 880

universal remote control

\$250, JULY/AUG 2005

This advanced model boasts a full-color LCD screen, but any Harmony remote is a good remote. logitech.com



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CAUTION

WHAT'S STOPPING YOU?



No Problem



Today's gear can present you with so many options that sometimes it's hard to make the right choice. Let *S&V's* experts show you the way out of three common home-entertainment dilemmas.

The HDTV Jungle

BY AL GRIFFIN



THE PROBLEM Your old TV works just fine, so you've put off buying an HDTV.

You used to have some good reasons for waiting. Prices for wide-screen high-def sets were higher than you'd ever *imagined* paying for a TV, and a swarm of new technologies with strange names like plasma, DLP, and LCoS left you baffled. And it wasn't clear how you'd actually get HDTV programs. Sure, the network TV stations in big cities were broadcasting high-def, but the affiliates in your hometown took longer to get on the bandwagon. And when you called your cable company to see if they offered HDTV, the service rep just said, "HDTV — uh, what's that?" But now that

the cable company is calling *you* to extol the virtues of HDTV, you're wondering how to get in the game.

THE SOLUTION High-def channels are now widely available on both satellite and cable, and broadcast stations in cities from Florida to Alaska are airing HDTV during prime-time. So programming's no longer a reason to put off buying an HDTV, and set prices continue to drop. But there's still the issue of too many TV types to choose from. With a little advice, though, you can zero in on the right one.

If you're tight on money, space, or both, your best bet is a **direct-view CRT** model (below left). These HDTVs display high-def programs using the same cathode-ray tube technology found in your old TV, and most have a wide "16:9" screen. With screens ranging from 26 to 36 inches (measured diagonally), they can easily squeeze into small spaces, and prices go from a very reasonable \$500 up to \$2,000.

Another HDTV option for the space-challenged is **flat-panel plasma and LCD** sets — but you're going to have to spend a lot more. The key advantage here, of course, is that you can mount the TV on a wall like a picture. But flat HDTVs can also deliver exceptional pictures. Recent 42-inch plasmas that received glowing reviews in these pages include Pioneer's PDP-4350HD (May, bottom right), Panasonic's TH-

42XVS30U (May), and Dell's W4200 (page 47). Actual selling prices (as opposed to hyperinflated "list" prices) are \$5,000, \$4,500, and \$2,899, respectively.

Flat-panel HDTV screen sizes can be as big as 71 inches for plasma and 45 inches for LCD. But prices for those mammoth models are unthinkably high for the average Joe. With screen sizes ranging from 42 to 73 inches and prices starting as low as a thousand bucks, a **rear-projection TV** (RPTV) provides a much bigger bang for your buck.

RPTVs use tubes or a light engine with DLP (Digital Light Processing), LCD, or LCoS (liquid crystal on silicon) technology to project images onto the screen. While rear-projection sets can be bulky — especially those based on older CRT technology — most of the latest DLP and LCD sets are less than 20 inches deep, with many measuring only 15 to 18 inches. (You'll even find a handful of *really* slim DLP models that use a special lens assembly to get cabinet depth down to a mere 7 inches, though they're a lot more expensive.) Unlike direct-view tube and flat-panel plasma and LCD sets, which perform well in brightly lit rooms, RPTVs need a dim space to look their best. Even so, our reviewers have waxed poetic about such models as Mitsubishi's 48-inch WS-48515 (February/March), Toshiba's 52-inch 52HM94 (June, below), and Sony's Qualia 006 (May). Actual selling prices are as low as \$1,999, \$1,895, and \$10,999, respectively.

LOOKING AHEAD With more high-def channels coming online all the time, HDTV is on a roll. You can expect to see even more set types unveiled in the near future, with HDTVs driven by exotic technologies like SED — short for Surface-conduction Electron-emitter Display — which combines the best aspects of CRT technology with a flat-panel form factor. But with more companies adding their own unique spins to capture your high-def dollars, set prices can only continue to come down. As that happens, there'll be no reason left to sit on the sidelines.

High-def channels are widely available and prices for HDTVs continue to drop. But there's still the problem of too many TV types to choose from.



Entertainment Overload

BY KEN C. POHLMANN

THE PROBLEM Hey! Congratulations! Your bookcase o' discs is mighty impressive. What are we looking at here? Maybe a thousand CDs and 500 DVDs? A monster collection like that must be a tremendous joy — except, of course, when you actually want to find something. You can alphabetize them, use the Dewey Decimal System, or any other scheme, but that one CD might be in your wife's car, your kid's boombox, or your toddler's mouth. Speaking of 2-year-olds, I know one who passionately loves to rearrange shiny discs into an ordering that only his secret genius can fathom. The fact is, the bigger the forest, the harder it is to find a certain tree.

THE SOLUTION Throw away all your discs, of course. Whoa! Wait a second — let me explain. In other words, move all that precious entertainment to a server. That's not as scary as it sounds. I'm not suggesting that you call IBM and have a mainframe installed in your living room. Servers can be a PC, a dedicated box with a big hard-disk drive, or as simple as an iPod. Whichever way you go, you'd be transforming that brimming collection of discs into an easy-to-manage collection of digital files. So instead of a wall of CDs and DVDs, you'd have a hard drive loaded with your favorite music and movies. (Of course, most folks will hang onto their discs for archival purposes or at least back up their newly minted electronic collection on a secondary drive.)

The advantages of file storage are compelling. For starters, apart from the server itself, files don't take up any space. And you can organize and classify to your heart's content without ever touching a CD or DVD, build playlists for any occasion, and find any song you want in a matter of seconds. No more hunting for missing discs in the kids' rooms or under a car seat. (Sure, you can do that with a CD or DVD megachanger, but it's easier and faster with a server.) Last but not least, you'll be able to set up a wired or wireless network around your server that lets you access your collection from anywhere in the house.

So, a server is the clear winner, right? Well, that depends on what you want to use it for. Music can eat up a decent amount of disk space but video takes up more — a lot more. With modest data compression that doesn't compromise sound quality, you can fit 1,000 CDs on a reasonably priced server, but several hundred DVDs copied without additional compression will require a much bigger investment in drive capacity and might raise some legal questions. For example,



Hollywood is challenging the legality of movie servers like the **Kaleidescape** (our February/March 2004 review is on the **S&V** Web site) that let you store copies of your DVDs on a huge hard drive.

Still, manufacturers are hotly pursuing this new market. We've reviewed a number of servers. For example, **Yamaha's MusicCAST** (September 2003) has a CD drive, an 80-GB hard drive, and Wi-Fi to send music wirelessly throughout your house. The **Escent DVM-300** (June 2005, bottom right) ups the ante, ripping CDs to its 300-GB hard drive and controlling up to three DVD/CD changers. And the awesome **Xperinet Polaris** (June 2005, bottom left) can deliver up to seven streams of movies from its 1.25 terabytes of storage. (All of these reviews are on our Web site.) That's just the beginning.

LOOKING AHEAD To serve or not to serve? If you're a trendsetter, a server is the way to go. It's simply more elegant and convenient than discs. And as prices come down, servers will proliferate. Look for an explosion of fully integrated systems that can acquire, store, organize, and distribute all your entertainment assets. As we break the habit of buying and playing discs or copying them to memory, we'll skip the disc part and just buy files to store on home servers. It's possible we'll eventually skip personal storage altogether in favor of on-demand delivery from some huge central server. Either way, whether it's in your home or hidden in a silo in North Dakota, the advantages of a server make it the bookcase of the future.

Having a monster CD and DVD collection is a tremendous joy — except when you actually want to find something. The problem is, the bigger the forest, the harder it is to find a certain tree.



The Sound of Style

Three surround speaker packages bound to please both eyes and ears

BY AL GRIFFIN

Unlike oxygen, food, or water, surround sound isn't necessary for survival. But if you recently upgraded to a slim, big-screen HDTV, you're probably feeling a need to update the audio part of your system with something equally tasty. Home theater used to mean huge tower speakers or chunky satellites paired with subwoofers that took up as many cubic feet as an SUV's gas tank. But a new trend in speaker design has yielded a flock of systems that match the trim new video displays.

We pulled together a group of three sleek, stylish packages priced between \$2,000 and \$2,500: the Infinity Total Solutions TSS-4000 (\$2,394), Mirage's Omnisat V2 series (\$2,400), and Polk Audio's RM30 (\$2,080). In addition to stylin' looks, these systems can be installed in a number of configurations. And each comes with hardware for wall-mounting the satellite speakers or placing them on bookshelves or stands. So let's fire up the plasma and get down to business. ▶

For the lab report on these three systems, go to the **S&V** Web site.

TSS-4000

One technique speaker makers are using to slim down their offerings is to switch to rigid aluminum cabinets that can be shaped into trim profiles. With its gleaming all-metal satellites and subwoofer, Infinity's Total Solutions TSS-4000 rig would fit right into a futuristic, robot-assisted home theater. The system I tested consists of three matched TSS-SAT4000 satellites for the front left/right and center channels, a pair of smaller TSS-SAT1100 sats for the surrounds, and the TSS-SUB750 subwoofer. Each satellite comes with a base for shelf or stand mounting plus a sturdy metal wall bracket that swivels the speaker up to 30° off-center. Infinity also offers sturdy aluminum stands that make a sweet match for both the 4000s and the 1100s (\$279 each and \$179 a pair, respectively).

SETUP

I placed the left/right TSS-4000s alongside my plasma TV stand about 3 feet out from the front wall and the center speaker on a shelf directly beneath the TV. The sub went into the front corner of my room. I particularly appreciated the TSS-1100's tall stands, which positioned the speakers a foot or two above my seated ear level — a good elevation for surround speakers. Slim speakers tend to have limited bass, so I set my processor for a fairly high, 120-Hz low-pass setting to filter the low frequencies out of the main channels and pass them to the subwoofer.

MUSIC PERFORMANCE

Turning first to trusted CDs to get a grip on the Infinity system's stereo performance, I spun the jazzy "Outlaws" from *Bill Frisell, Dave Holland, and Elvin Jones*. I was quickly impressed by the SUB750's performance. Dave Holland's walking acoustic-bass lines came across as full and authoritative, hitting all the low notes without sounding boomy. The upper bass notes were slightly thin, but I got a good sense overall of the instrument's heft and body. Listening next to The Shins' "Pink Bullets," I found the vocals clear and sibilants neither harsh nor overemphasized. And when the harmonica solo kicked in, it had a balanced tone, at once brassy and sweet.

I hadn't heard much music from Rammstein — a German band that can best be described as Metallica meets the Third Reich in the Matrix — but when a friend told me that the singer sets himself on fire during concerts, I had to check out their new DVD, *Live aus Berlin*. Playing the Dolby Digital 5.1 mix of the anthemic "Rammstein," the Infinity rig delivered an excellent sense of arena-crowd ambience. I felt as if I was right there in Berlin and could follow the path of the fans' whistles and howls behind me. The singer's guttural growling sounded full and clear through the center speaker. And the system didn't flinch at loud volumes.

Cranked up, the dynamic

impact of the drums was nothing short of thunderous, with snare hits sounding slamming and crisp, and the kick drum low and tight. Oh, yeah — the guy did sing with his jacket on fire.

MOVIE PERFORMANCE

Turning to a scene in *I, Robot* where Detective Del Spooner (Will Smith) is chased through an underground tunnel by a fleet of nasty robots, I had another opportunity to hear the Infinity system shine in surround. As the escaping detective ran his vehicle up against

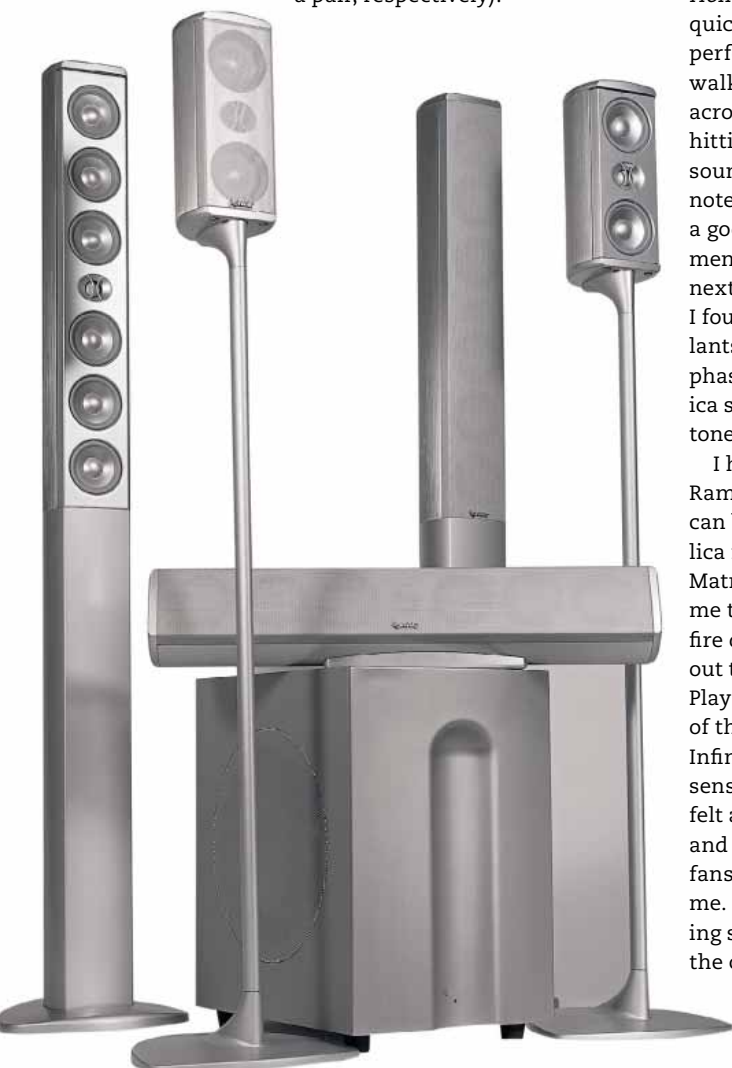
fast facts

- **TSS-SAT4000/CENTER4000 front speakers** ¾-in tweeter, two 3½-in midranges, four 3½-in woofers; SAT4000, 23 in high, CENTER4000, 23 in wide
- **TSS-SAT1100 surround** ¾-in tweeter, two 3½-in midranges; 9¼ in high
- **TSS-SUB750 subwoofer** 10-in driver; 150-watt amp; crossover bypass; 10¾ x 16¾ x 15¾ in, 33 lbs
- Aluminum cabinets and finish
- \$2,394
- infinitysystems.com, 516-674-4463

the sides of the tunnel, spattering glass and robot parts along the way, the sats conveyed a vivid sonic image of ricocheting debris. It was actually one of the most impressive surround sound performances I've heard in my room. And when the bass kicked in, I felt it in my bones. Dialogue coming from the center speaker, meanwhile, was consistently clear and natural, even at off-center seats on my couch.

BOTTOM LINE

With its clean, all-metal looks, slim profile, and slamming performance, Infinity's TSS-4000 system is an excellent option for any home theater. But its versatile wall-mounting options make it an especially ideal solution for rooms where floor space is at a premium. Even after I took them down, the Infinity speakers' great looks and sound left a lasting impression.



With their thin aluminum cabinets and sculptured look, the speakers in Mirage's V2 series appear to come from the same universe as the Infinity system. But take a closer peek and you'll see a difference. The speakers in the Mirage package are Omnipolar models featuring a top-mounted midrange/tweeter array. An additional component called the Omniguide, a saucer-shaped deflector that hovers directly above the driver, directs the sound in a spherical 360° pattern. The idea is to maximize the level of reflected sound coming from the speaker to create a wider, deeper, more lifelike presentation.

The system's anchor is the Omnisat V2 FS tower, each of which comes with a tempered-glass base that provides both metal spikes and rubber feet for carpet or bare-floor installations. Rounding out the system are the V2 CC center speaker, V2 surrounds, and S10 subwoofer, a handsome wood-veneered model.

SETUP

My setup followed pretty much the same lines as for the Infinity system. Both the V2 CC and V2 surround satellites come with hardware for wall and ceiling mounts, and Mirage also offers stands (\$149

a pair) for the surrounds, though I ended up using my own stands.

MUSIC PERFORMANCE

Listening first in stereo with the V2 tower/S10 sub combination, I played my trusty Bill Frisell CD. Mirage's claims for spacious, involving sound were quickly verified: the ride cymbal had a crisp, open sound that conveyed complex overtones and texture, and the processed electric-guitar sounds were cast with a width and depth that belied the slim towers' appearance. In Frisell's version of "Moon River," the acoustic-guitar leads had a smooth, natural tone. Unaided by the subwoofer, the V2 towers produced passable bass. With the sub in the mix, the sound was strikingly full, with Dave Holland's acoustic-bass lines coming through cleanly from the top to the bottom of the scale.

When I fired up Rammstein, the Omnipolar sats did a great job of conveying concert ambience, with discrete handclaps cutting through the general roar. A synthesized propeller sound was consistently solid as it arced across the front and then the rear channels, and the singer's monstrous voice sounded full and clear coming from the V2 center speaker. Dynamics overall were excellent — just what you want for heavy metal. I was also impressed at how cleanly the sub rendered both the bass guitar and kick drum.

MOVIE PERFORMANCE

When I returned to Will Smith and his character's plight in *I, Robot*, the Mirage system did a formidable job

of conveying the sense of threat — signaled here by a terrifying swell of bass — as massive robot carriers surround his car in the tunnel. During the ensuing chase, surround effects like robot carcasses smashing against concrete walls sounded clear, with a pinpoint sense of placement in space. All in all, the Mirages did a powerful job of evoking the tunnel's subterranean atmosphere. I was also impressed with the performance of the V2 center speaker. For example, in a subsequent scene where a doctor examines a robot, dialogue stayed just as clear when I shifted my position to an off-center seat.

BOTTOM LINE

If spacious sound in a sleek package is what you're after, Mirage's V2 FS tower-based system will be a no-brainer. Of the three systems here, I found its sound to be the most refined and involving with music, and its dynamics on action movies left little to be desired. Oh, yeah — if I didn't make this clear enough before: the dark-toned system looks totally badass. It was a perfect visual match for my black-framed plasma. Mirage obviously set out to do something special in designing this system, and it shows. A fantastic value overall.



fast facts

- Omnipolar design for 360° sound
- **V2 FS tower** 1-in tweeter, 4½-in midrange, two 4½-in woofers, four 4½-in passive radiators; 45 in high
- **V2 CC center** ¾-in tweeter, 3-in midrange, two 4½-in woofers; 17½ in wide
- **V2 surround** 1-in tweeter, 4½-in woofer; 8 in high
- **S10 subwoofer** 10-in driver; 200-watt amp; crossover bypass; 14¾ x 17 x 18½ in, 41 lbs
- Aluminum satellite cabinets
- Brushed black or silver finish on towers and center; platinum/black, black, silver, or white on surrounds; black or platinum on subwoofer
- \$2,400
- miragespeakers.com, 416-321-1800

RM30 System

The third aluminum entry in our lean speaker spotlight, Polk Audio's RM30 system features satellites likewise designed to accommodate a variety of setups, including wall mounting. At 6½ inches deep and about 6 inches wide, Polk's sats are a good deal chunkier than those in the Infinity and many other wall-friendly systems. But Polk gives you another installation choice: both the RM30 satellites used for the front left/right channels and the RM302 center speaker come with plastic bases for table or stand mounting. The other components of the system I tested were the RM101 satellites, a tiny two-way speaker that worked well for the surround channels, and the compact PSW404 subwoofer. The RM101 sats come with hardware that lets you mount them to a wall or attach them to Polk's SA-2 stands (\$89 a pair).

SETUP

I installed the RM30 system following the same template as for the previous two. The main difference was that I used a pair of my own stands to support the RM30 left/right front sats. Doing so required using the plastic base supports that Polk includes with the speakers. These provided adequate support, but build quality was kind of flimsy — I worried about bump-

ing into the speakers. Those concerns extended to the subwoofer, which, though solidly constructed, sits on four tiny plastic feet loosely attached by nails. There are no threaded holes for inserting carpet spikes or other, more substantial forms of support.

MUSIC PERFORMANCE

An initial stereo listen to Frisell's "Outlaws" on the RM30 system indicated wide imaging, full-range sound, and smooth integration between the PSW404 sub and the sats. The system handled loud volumes well: when I cranked things up during a passage where the guitarist lets loose with distortion and the drums and bass get all frenetic, the sound remained clear and well-defined. Compared with the previous two systems, though, cymbals sounded overly crisp. The system's bright voicing was readily apparent in The Shins' "Pink Bullets": vocals had an edgy, sibilant quality, and the normally smooth keyboards sounded somewhat grainy.

Moving on to Rammstein's cyber-metal in 5.1-channel surround, I found much less to be fussy about. Actually, I was impressed: the kick drum and bass were low-reaching and solid, the snare-drum slam sounded decent, and the singer's voice was clear as it emanated from the center

fast facts

- **RM30 left/right front** 1-in tweeter, two 4½-in woofers; 24 in high
- **RM302 center** 1-in tweeter, two 4½-in woofers; 24 in wide
- **RM101 surround** ¾-in tweeter, 3½-in midrange; 7 in high
- **PSW404 subwoofer** 10-in driver; 200-watt amp; crossover bypass; 13⅝ x 14⅜ x 16½ in, 46 lbs
- Pewter finish satellites, black finish subwoofer
- \$2,080
- polkaudio.com, 800-377-7655

speaker. The surround speakers conveyed a palpable sense of concert ambience, and the circular pans from the keyboard sounded smooth as they arced around.

MOVIE PERFORMANCE

The RM30 system's admirable handling of concert DVDs carried over to movies. The tunnel chase in *I, Robot* turned out to be a thrilling ride, with directional sound effects coming across with pinpoint accuracy. In a scene where the crushed remains of a large vehicle are unexpectedly hurtled toward Detective Spooner, the sonic trajectory as it launched from the front of my room and landed behind me was startlingly realistic. The subwoofer also cleanly and tightly rendered the thunderous bass accompanying the mayhem. Finally, the subsequent chat between the errant robot and Dr. Susan Calvin in her lab sounded clear, even from off-center seats.

BOTTOM LINE

Polk Audio's RM30 system has what it takes to deliver surround sound excitement with movies and concert DVDs. Overall, I found its sound too bright for my tastes during stereo listening with jazz and folk-influenced acoustic music, but I liked its deep, clean bass and wide imaging. While its build quality and style paled a bit compared with the other systems, it's more than \$300 cheaper, and Polk's versatile installation options also help even the score.

S&V



Breaking Out of the Box



If you spent \$5,000 on your TV but only \$500 on your speakers, it's time to get some better sound BY JOHN SCIACCA

Buying a home theater system used to mean going to a swanky boutique where a designer deftly guided you through the process. Like a tailored suit, your system was carefully assembled one component at a time after hours of diligent auditioning. But to get this kind of high-end service you usually had to have a high-end credit-card limit — which immediately placed these systems beyond the reach of most people. Thankfully, as the demand for home theater grew, more affordable gear began to appear at the big electronics stores.

But a lot of people still found it too hard to pick out a complete system à la carte, so many companies started packaging everything together — and the home theater in a box (HTiB) was born. Today, buying a system can be as simple as phoning QVC or just

tossing a box into your shopping cart at Wal-Mart!

This isn't entirely a bad thing, because *any* kind of home theater speaker setup is usually better than just using a TV's meager speakers. And many systems are so cheap that they've brought surround sound to people who otherwise couldn't have afforded a home theater setup.

But then there are the people who pick up really cheap HTiB systems at the same time they're paying several grand for high-tech flat-panel LCD or plasma HDTVs. They *can* afford something better, but the sound part of the equation gets short shrift for whatever reason. If you find yourself in that category — or have been thinking about buying an all-in-one setup just to keep things simple — read on. Here are ten steps that will help you break out of your box and get into better sound! ▶

ILLUSTRATIONS BY BILL VILLAREAL



1. TAKE STOCK

The first step is to evaluate your current system and see if you can salvage any of its components.

While a total “out with the old, in with the new” philosophy is great if you have the bucks, hanging on to some of these golden oldies can save your budget.

Source components like tape decks and VCRs are prime candidates for recycling, because you probably don’t have many options for playing your old audio cassettes and VHS tapes. And you can always change them out later.

Before hanging on to any of the components from your HTiB, make sure they work with other gear — and are just plain worth salvaging. (To be honest, though, most HTiB systems use the cheapest components possible and probably shouldn’t be used in your new rig.) Often, the speakers have proprietary connectors or must run through the bass module for proper equalization. Also, speakers are typically rated at 4 to 8 ohms. If yours are outside that range, they might pose a challenge to your new system. Is the subwoofer up to the task of anchoring your new rig? HTiB systems often include a wimpy bass module that can’t produce the kind of deep, loud bass you get in a good movie theater. Does the receiver have enough inputs to accommodate your current and future gear?

Remember: you want to upgrade for *better* performance. If something doesn’t meet that goal, kick it to the curb.

2. MONEY MATTERS

Set a realistic budget for your new system. The test reports in *Sound & Vision* will give you a good starting point for what gear is likely to cost — just keep in mind that actual selling prices are almost always less than list prices.

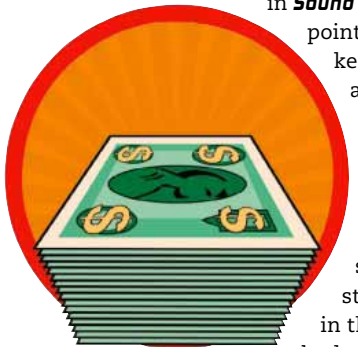
Neither the bottom *nor* top of the line is usually right for most people. You can assemble a *great* system by shopping in the middle of the line.

Decent 5.1-channel surround speaker packages (sans electronics) start around \$600, with lots of options in the \$1,000 to \$2,000 range. As your budget goes up, you’ll get into models with

larger, better-performing drivers, graduate from small bookshelf speakers to towers (at least in front), and see cabinets with real wood veneers.

If you decide to buy a separate subwoofer and satellite speakers instead of a complete system, you’ll find that a good sub can eat up half (or more) of your speaker budget — starting around \$350. More money equals more output (louder) and more impact (lower).

The receiver is the heart, mind, and soul of your system, so don’t skimp on it. While models start as low as \$300, you should probably avoid buying the cheapest one. Since *everything* plugs into the receiver, the additional inputs offered on more expensive models should be incentive enough for paying at least a little more up front.



If you’re not going to *significantly* improve the performance of your existing system, why bother upgrading? You’d be better off saving a little longer until you can afford a system really worth owning.

3. PREPARE TO RECEIVE

Since your HTiB probably came with a receiver (or DVD/receiver combo), you might be wondering why you should buy a new one. I’m glad you asked!

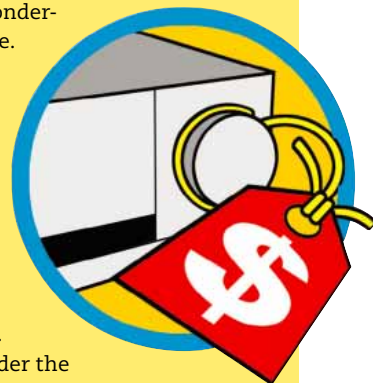
To meet the aggressive pricing of these systems, costs must be cut, and one of the first things to go is power. Since the receiver powers all of the satellite speakers, you want something with a little muscle. When checking specs, don’t just look at the wattage, but see *how* the unit is rated.

To get a sense of what’s really under the hood, check power ratings for “all channels driven from 20 Hz to 20 kHz.” Also, the lower the number for THD (total harmonic distortion), the better. A beefy power supply is heavy, so a receiver’s weight can sometimes be used as a quick judge of quality.

Even the most basic A/V receiver often eclipses the scant number of inputs offered by HTiB receivers. To jack in your DVD player, gaming consoles, cable box, TiVo, and iPod, you’ll want to make sure there are enough inputs to go around. Equally important is the number of digital audio inputs. With more components offering Dolby Digital and DTS audio output, it’s a good idea to have multiple optical and coaxial digital inputs on hand.

To avoid having to switch inputs through your TV, you’ll want to route video signals through the receiver. While most receivers now offer composite-, component-, and S-video switching, the slickest models upconvert the composite- and S-video signals and then route *all* incoming video signals to a single output. This frees you from switching inputs on your TV, which greatly simplifies day-to-day operation.

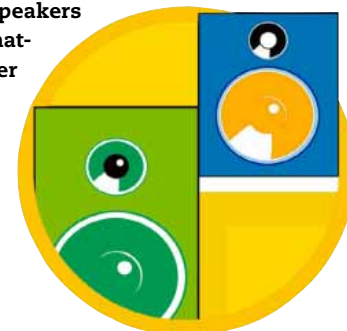
Finally, if your HTiB system is more than a year old, it probably doesn’t include the latest surround processing modes, like Dolby Pro Logic IIX or DTS Neo:6, which can create surprisingly good surround sound from two-channel material like CDs and older TV shows and movies.



4. SOUND OFF

Just as important as a speaker’s sound is its looks. Before shopping for a speaker system, determine what décor issues might dictate where the speakers will be installed. Fortunately, whatever your needs, there’s a speaker style that allows for first-rate performance.

Where size isn’t an issue, large floorstanding speakers usually deliver the best sound. Their larger drivers reach lower



to cover virtually the entire frequency range, and some include built-in subwoofers for even fuller bass.

If space is tight, smaller “bookshelf” models might fit the bill. You can place these guys on shelves or in a cabinet, but they perform best on stands and can produce terrific sound when paired with a good subwoofer.

Recently, on-wall speakers have appeared that are designed to be the yin to the yang of plasma and LCD TVs. Oozing style, they both look and sound great. (For a peek at three systems priced around \$2,400, see “The Sound of Style,” page 77.)

For décor-sensitive rooms where you don’t want to see the speakers, nearly every manufacturer offers in-wall models that — when properly installed — can deliver sound rivaling that of their freestanding counterparts. Best of all, they virtually disappear.

When no space exists for traditional speaker placement, the ceiling can be your final frontier. Sonance, Triad, Niles, and Speakercraft offer ceiling speakers with aimable drivers that can create a realistic and engaging soundstage even when placed over your head.

Unlike a receiver, which can become obsolete with the introduction of new, must-have features, great speakers will last you a *long* time. Regardless of the style you select, you’ll never regret it if you go for quality.

5. GO LOW



While it reproduces only a scant 0.3% of the audible frequency range, a subwoofer has a big impact on any home theater system. I mean, when is the last time you heard someone talking about kick-ass treble? A subwoofer delivers the *emotion* in home theater, but the only emotion a cheap sub delivers is disappointment.

Remember those classic movie moments? Arnold pumping shotgun shells into the 18-wheeler? Cannonballs shattering Captain Jack Sparrow’s Black Pearl? The Orcs’ onslaught on Helm’s Deep? These scenes are loaded with bass that can rattle the fillings clean out of your head! Without floor-shaking effects, such moments become ho-hum.

Finding a sub that plays both low and loud used to require a monolith that would be more at home in Stonehenge than your living room. But with new driver designs and digital amplification, this is no longer true. Definitive Technology, Velodyne, Sunfire, and others have subs that produce huge sound from tiny cabinets.

Having a big driver or amp doesn’t guarantee great performance, though, and a sub that sounds impressive on movies might be boomy handling a bass guitar or drum kit. Since it’s easy to tell if a musical bass note sounds realistic (who really knows what an exploding Death Star sounds like?), bring some music discs when you’re auditioning subs.

Having great bass is so important to the sound of your system that you should spend slightly more than you originally budgeted if it will get you a much better sounding sub.

6. SOURCING OUT

The most important component in any home theater, aside from the receiver, is the DVD player. Since you’re likely to be watching a lot of DVDs, buying a \$49 player isn’t the way to go. Go for a model that supports progressive-scan (480p) playback, and look for something called “2:3 pull-down,” which provides smoother playback of material transferred from film to video — which includes just about any movie DVD. If your TV has a DVI or HDMI input, consider a player that can take advantage of these all-digital video connections. These players can upconvert the DVD signal to HDTV-like resolution. If you have a large collection of music downloads, look for a player that supports the MP3 or WMA format. For topnotch sound, seek out models that can also play multichannel DVD-Audio or Super Audio CD (SACD) discs — their surround sound mixes can provide a thrilling experience rivaling a great movie soundtrack or live performance.



If you haven’t considered satellite radio, now’s the time to check out the Sirius and XM services. Hundreds of commercial-free, digital music stations sure would sound sweet on that new system. The only catch: it’ll cost you \$13 a month.

7. EVERYTHING IN PLACE

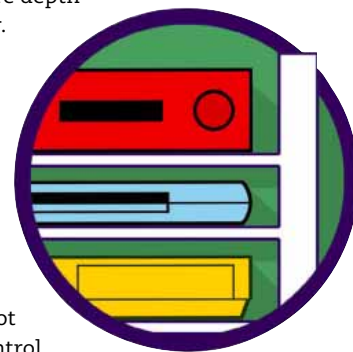
Decide where your new gear is going to go *before* you start bringing it home. Since electronics aren’t really finicky — they just want a relatively cool, dry, decently ventilated place away from dust — you *could* just pile everything on the floor beneath the TV. And, you *could* spend the rest of your life sleeping on the couch.

When looking for a cabinet, entertainment center, rack, or whatever, keep four things in mind: 1) Since practically every A/V component is 17 inches wide, the cabinet interior should be at least 20 inches wide so you can get your hands on either side of a piece of gear. 2) Many, *many* wires go to and from the receiver, so the more depth you have to work with, the better. Shoot for at least 20 inches.

3) It’s usually okay to stack components, but A/V receivers, satellite receivers, and some of the new cable boxes can get *very* warm and shouldn’t have any gear placed on top of them.

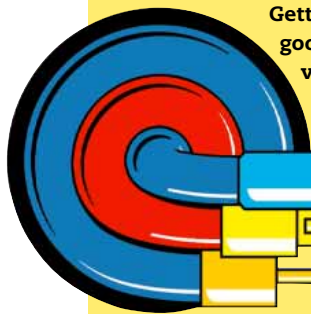
4) If you want to have everything out of sight behind closed doors but you’re worried about not being able to use your remote control

— relax! For a couple hundred bucks, you can set up a simple infrared (IR) repeater system that will give your remote Superman-like X-ray vision. (For step-by-step instructions on installing an IR repeater system, see my “Custom Installer” column from the April 2004 issue, available on the **S&V** Web site.)



8. GETTING WIRED

Until we become a truly wireless world, cables will remain a necessary evil. Few people get excited over the prospect of buying cables, but none of this great gear can work without them. So embrace wiring as another piece you need to complete the home theater puzzle.



Getting the signal to each speaker requires good speaker wire. This doesn't mean that vermicelli-like stuff that often comes with HTiB speakers. Wire is described by its gauge, with a lower number meaning the wire is heavier — for example, 12 gauge is thicker than 18 gauge.

A lower gauge can be important when the runs are really long.

Think of a fire hose vs. a garden hose — the lower gauge allows signals to flow with less resistance. Plan to spend about 50¢ to \$2 a foot for decent cables. And use banana-plug connectors if your speakers and receiver accept them, since they make a very solid connection, are a breeze to plug and unplug, and are less than \$10 a pair.

You'll need either coaxial or optical cables to send the digital audio signals from your DVD player, game console, and cable box to your receiver. Depending on quality and length, these usually run \$20 to \$70 each.

If you're adding a DVD-Audio or SACD player, you'll need analog cables — *six* of them — to pass along the multichannel surround sound signal. (There are a handful of pricey components that can send the signal digitally, using either proprietary connectors or a FireWire connection. This *greatly* simplifies connection.)

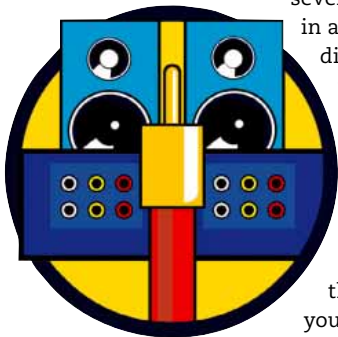
9. HOOKING UP

Having a kitchen stocked with the best ingredients doesn't guarantee a terrific meal. Likewise, just having great gear doesn't promise a great system. Everything first needs to be correctly set up.

I can't emphasize enough the importance of proper speaker placement. In a perfect world, all five (or six or seven) satellite speakers would be arrayed

in a circle with each speaker at the same distance from the listener. But don't worry if your room doesn't allow for this — speaker makers have found ways to compensate for less than perfect conditions. Still, there are a few rules you should follow for the best sound: 1) The center speaker should be directly above or below the TV screen (or directly behind it if you're using an acoustically transparent projection screen as in a movie theater).

2) The front left and right speakers should be equally spaced from the center speaker, forming an equilateral triangle with the main listening position. 3) The surround speakers should never be ahead of the listening position.



While it's easy to be overwhelmed by the number of cables involved in connecting a system, follow this simple rule: one cable at a time. Also, you'll *never* regret spending the time to label each cable at both ends. *Trust me.*

If your installation requires things like running wires inside walls or under carpeting, cutting holes in walls, or mounting speakers — or you just want to make sure it's done right the first time — consider hiring a pro. The Custom Electronic Design and Installation Association (CEDIA.net) has members across the country who are ready and willing to step in.

10. TAKING CONTROL

Once everything is up and running, it's time to sit back and enjoy those sweet, sweet sounds. But as you go to fire up your new system, you'll likely notice that your coffee table has sprouted a fungus-like population of remote controls.

While this pile is impressive in a "Look how big *mine* is!" sort of way, juggling multiple remotes to watch a DVD gets old. Fast. And believe me — you don't want to get a phone call from your significant other when she can't figure out how to get her daily fix of *Oprah!*

There's a simple solution to this madness: buy *another* remote. I know it seems illogical that the solution to having too many remotes is to get a new one.

But once you've got your hands on a good universal remote, you'll be like a Jedi with his lightsaber.

A decent universal remote runs \$150 to \$400 and will turn using your system into a one-button affair. For instance, pressing a Watch Movie button turns your TV on and selects the proper input; turns your receiver on, changes it to the proper input, and engages the surround processing; and turns your DVD player on and issues the play command. If your lights are remote-controlled, it can dim those as well. A good remote might turn out to be the best component you buy. I'm a big fan of Logitech's Harmony remotes — they're easy to use and simple to program. (For more on finding the right remote, see "No Problem," page 73.)



Comparing a home theater in a box to a well-designed home theater system is a bit like comparing a Honda Civic to a Porsche Carrera. Sure, they're both cars, and they'll get you from Point A to Point B, but that's pretty much where the similarities end. While an HTiB can be a great starter or secondary system, to take your home theater experience to the next level, you need to break out of the box and assemble a system designed with performance in mind. After you upgrade, movies will virtually explode into your living room and music will sound so realistic, you'll think you're in a concert hall. Why would you want to settle for less than that?

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LOOKING FOR SOME DVD ACTION?

These 10 discs will push your system to the limit



1 Master and Commander (collector's edition, 20th Century Fox)

The Picture Director Peter Weir strives to faithfully recreate period detail in this nautical tale — an effort that's reflected in the refreshingly natural color palette. And the Oscar-winning cinematography and Oscar-nominated special effects consistently draw you deep into battle scenes.

The Sound Powerful surround sound and low-bass effects help to heighten the film's action. The dialogue is consistently clear and natural, even as cannonballs rip through the ship's starboard side and careen off the port side.

The Killer Demo Chapter 4, "Under Attack." Watching this first and most vivid of the sea battles on a big-screen HDTV with a good surround sound system will make your heart leap into your throat.

Standout Extra Hard to choose, since the many extras take up an entire second disc. But the 70-minute "making of" documentary is a fascinating look at how computer-generated effects enhanced the film's battle scenes.

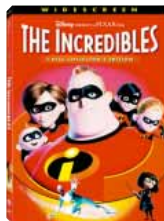
This DVD offers reference-quality video and audio, and it's a great story to boot.

— Al Griffin

2 The Incredibles (widescreen collector's edition, Disney/Pixar)

The Picture This is the best-looking animated film ever made, and that's saying something. Its hyper-expressive characters and familiar settings are rendered in sparkling detail, from the spotty shave that gets Bob a lecture by his boss to the cracked paint job of his laughably tiny car.

The Sound Creating a convincing fantasy world calls for some intricate sound design, and nowhere does *The Incredibles* break the illusion. In one memorable example, we hear the wash of the ocean waves as Mom and the kids hit the water after their plane crashes, followed by a



dull roar just before a huge piece of missile splashes down.

The Killer Demo Chapter 23, "100-Mile Dash." This excellent chase scene — with Dash pursued across leagues of jungle by soldiers in flying, bladed hovercrafts — is filled with the kind of spectacular stunts that only animation can deliver.

Standout Extra Check out the short sequence of "Incrediblunders" on Disc 2, featuring wacky animations of hair gone crazy, the heroes smacking into pylons or being crushed by planes, and half-rendered faces, hands, and expressions.

This is the complete package, and even if you don't enjoy the humor, the action, or the characters, you'll still have the best-looking computer animation ever committed to disc.

— David Katzmaier

3 The Return of the King

(special extended edition, New Line)

The Picture While it does run 4 hours and 10 minutes, the extended edition of Peter Jackson's finest work has the luxury of sprawling over two of the four discs. Even the skies and backgrounds are clean and free of noise, and the colorful computer-generated beasts and nefarious characters are utterly convincing.

The Sound The music score fills the room during the rousing battle scenes, giving way to the dynamic clash of armor against sword or the deep crunch of huge stones caving in the walls of Minas Tirith.



The Killer Demo Go to Disc 2, Chapter 46, and be sure to turn up the volume until you can clearly hear King Theoden of Rohan riding across the front line of his cavalry, exhorting the troops in a death-embracing speech. Now leave the volume turned up for the visual and sonic onslaught to follow.

Standout Extra The documentary *J.R.R. Tolkien: The Legacy of Middle-earth* skillfully weaves interviews, still photos, and scenes from the movie into a focused half-hour filled with insights and trivia about Tolkien's inspirations and influences.

This DVD is the best of the Lord of the Rings series and one of the best boxed sets ever produced. — D.K.

4 The Empire Strikes Back

(Star Wars Trilogy, widescreen edition, 20th Century Fox)

The Picture The crystal-clear look of the restored film on DVD is even more impressive when you remember the laserdisc or VHS version. The Imperial Star Destroyers, snow speeders, and walkers look hyper-realistic, putting the computer-generated ships in *Revenge of the Sith* to shame. And everything from the hurtling asteroids to Yoda's toad-like skin comes across with new vividness.

The Sound As you'd expect from the people who brought you THX, the restored soundtrack is amazing. John Williams's timeless score plays throughout the action-packed two hours, complementing the splat-splat of the blasters during the battles and establishing the spooky atmosphere of Degobah.



The Killer Demo Chapter 14, "Battle in the Snow." We get our first look at the awesome Imperial walkers during this 10-minute spectacle as Luke's speeder squadron hurtles over the snow toward their towering forms. Note how Lucas's portrayal of meteoric speed in the cockpits alternates with wide shots of intricately choreographed flight patterns.

Standout Extra *The Birth of the Lightsaber* is the best featurette. If you ever wondered how a sword could compete in a world of laser guns, this is a must-watch.

The best film from the original trilogy, Empire is stunningly restored on DVD. — D.K.



5 Spider-Man 2 (Superbit, Sony)

The Picture While *Spider-Man 2* deservedly won an Oscar for Visual Effects, the image quality is nothing exceptional. The picture on the standard DVD often seems slightly washed out, like it was in movie theaters. But on a big screen, Sony's Superbit version has a vividness that notches up the now-famous clashes between Doc Ock and Spidey.

The Sound The movie got Oscar nominations for Sound and Sound Editing, no doubt because of the high-voltage action scenes, which contain myriad small sonic details placed convincingly in an equally dynamic surround mix.

The Killer Demo Chapter 42, "The Train." The editing of action, sound, and music kicks what could have been just another "fight atop a moving vehicle" sequence into high gear. And don't forget Chapter 39's "car thrown through a window" scene.

Standout Extra Because the Superbit version uses all the disc space for video and sound, there aren't any extras.

You're in for a great ride, on or off the train. — David Ranada

6 The Bourne Supremacy (widescreen edition, Universal)

The Picture The old-world European architecture that serves as a background for much of the movie comes through with crisp highlights and rich shadow detail. And the surprisingly natural-looking skin tones are a good starting point for tweaking your TV's color.

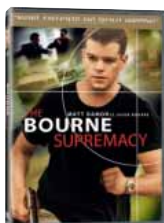
The Sound Equal parts evocative ambience and dynamic slam, the excellent sonics help to drive the story and keep your adrenaline pumping.

The Killer Demo Chapter 16, "On the Run." Jason Bourne

uses any means necessary, including cars, trains, and boats, to elude a dragnet. Lots of exciting surround effects trail Bourne as he throws an entire city into chaos.

Standout Extra "Blowing Things Up" gives a detailed explanation of how the pyrotechnics crew pulled off exploding a suburban home, complete with real flying bodies.

A thinking person's action movie that will keep you on the edge of your seat. — A.G.





7 Pirates of the Caribbean

(collector's edition, Disney)

The Picture With the seagoing passages set mostly under sunny skies — it is the Caribbean, after all — the oceanic sparkle combines with deep natural shadows to produce unusually realistic images with fine details.

The Sound Effects are placed in the Dolby Digital EX mix with unusual sensitivity. For instance, Johnny Depp's rescue of Keira Knightley in Chapter 3 includes a terrific sequence of subtle and layered effects — from underwater bubbling to gunshots whizzing past your ears.

The Killer Demo While most people would probably choose Chapter 11, "The Battle," with its pounding ship-to-ship cannonades, I'd recommend the passage in Chapter 3 where Depp first encounters Orlando Bloom. Their swordfight is a tough test for an HDTV's ability to portray details in deep shadows.

Standout Extra The "Fly on the Set" featurettes on Disc 2 focus on the kind of production details I'd have shot if I could have wandered around during filming, camcorder in hand.

Depp's over-the-top performance is nicely set off by the rich sounds and images. — D.R.



8 The Matrix Revolutions

(widescreen edition, Warner)

The Picture While *Revolutions* has the stylized green and gray color palette featured throughout the *Matrix* series, the image quality is terrific. The disc features deep, deep blacks that still retain plenty of detail and definition.

The Sound This DVD has everything you'd expect from a reference recording. Sound effects are convincingly located, dialogue is easy to understand, and nearly every scene bursts with surround action, whether full-blown effects or subtle ambience to draw you into the action. Make sure your furniture is bolted down to withstand the steady battering it's going to take from your subwoofer!

The Killer Demo Chapter 17, "Breaching the Dome." You'll be taken to the edge of sensory overload as the machines invade Zion amidst a swirling hail of lead that erupts from every corner of the room.

Standout Extra The second disc has several featurettes that offer a closer look into the making of the film. Especially intriguing is a multi-angle version of the Super Burly Brawl.

This exciting conclusion to The Matrix Trilogy offers a roller-coaster ride of A/V thrills that will push any home theater to its limits. — John Sciacca



9 Hero (Miramax)

The Picture I'm not one to gush over cinematography, but the sumptuous visuals in *Hero* are a smorgasbord for the eyes, with deeply saturated colors establishing the mood in every scene.

The Sound The surround channels are used engagingly throughout, either to create a sense of space or to convey thousands of arrows flying overhead. Detailed sounds like individual raindrops or the pluck of a string are as convincing as the loud crash and clang of swords. *Hero* won't give your sub a constant workout, but the bass kicks in hard when the action calls for it.

The Killer Demo If you've doubted how back surround speakers can enhance the home theater experience, check out Chapter 7 on a 6.1-channel system. Sound swirls around the room, perfectly tracking the action onscreen.

Standout Extra "Hero Defined" shows how director Zhang Yimou went to perfectionist lengths to get his shots, especially for the lake fight in Chapter 8.

If you avoid foreign films because you don't like subtitles, Hero's amazing action, terrific sound, and compelling story will change your mind. — J.S.



10 I, Robot

(widescreen edition, 20th Century Fox)

The Picture *I, Robot* relies heavily on computer-generated backgrounds to create its future world, but the pseudo-environments are painstakingly crafted and crammed with detail.

The Sound Lots of action in the surround channels during even quiet scenes gives the movie a lively feel. And the low-bass effects in action sequences — chase scenes in particular — will leave lesser subs puffing to keep up.

The Killer Demo Chapter 18, "You Are Experiencing a Car Accident." There's fear-inducing bass as a pair of robot carriers encircle Will Smith's car in a tunnel. The flurry of screeching wheels and crunching robot parts during his subsequent escape is surround sound mixing at its finest.

Standout Extra A gratuitous trailer for Fox's TV sitcom *Arrested Development* stands out, but not in a good way. Why do some studios litter DVDs with promotional materials for unrelated projects?

I, Robot might not be the best sci-fi movie ever made, but it still makes for an exciting home theater ride. — A.G.



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What's in Store

**Tweeter tests a radical
new way to shop
for your entertainment**

BY JAMIE SORCHER



PHOTOS BY MICHELLE HOOD

The days of going to an electronics store, choosing from a lineup of components, and carrying your selection out to the trunk of your car might be fading fast. We now want our entertainment with us all the time, wherever we go, but few of us have the time to wade through the overwhelming proliferation of gear being created to address that desire. Things like home theaters, multiroom entertainment systems, and home networks are inherently complex, and retailers are realizing that the best way to make them palatable to the average person is to simplify shopping as much as possible.

That's why you might begin to see more stores go down the path chosen by Tweeter Entertainment's prototype outlet in the Las Vegas suburb of Summerlin, Nevada. The venerable specialty chain, which started in New England in the 1970s, now has 160 stores and recently branched out into places like Florida and Illinois. But none of its stores offer the dramatically different experience you'll find in Las Vegas. Here, "home within the store" settings show gear integrated into typical rooms, and you're encouraged to think in terms of systems rather than individual components. Intrigued by this vision of shopping's future, we went to Vegas for a closer look. ➤



ROOMS WITH VIEWS

It's obvious from the moment you walk in that this store focuses on home-entertainment solutions, not stuff. Instead of shelves lined with gear, boxes stacked in the aisles, and the din of cash registers, you get an open floor plan that's clean, quiet, and inviting. Imagine a cross between an Apple store and Ikea, and you'll get the idea.

As soon as I arrived, I was greeted by Katie, the concierge — like being greeted by the maitre d' at an upscale restaurant. She asked pleasantly if I wanted something in particular or was just looking around. When I told her I was just browsing, she handed me a detailed map so I could take a self-guided tour. The oval space is designed to let you walk through at your own pace without any salespeople hovering — a big plus in my book.

Much of the store is taken up by the room settings, ranging from the "What's Cookin'" kitchen — which includes a Sony under-the-cabinet LCD TV/radio and Westinghouse's iCEBOX PC/DVD/TV with waterproof keyboard — to the "Family Night In" living room featuring HP's Digital Entertainment Center PC. Able to handle movie and music playback, gaming, recording, networking, and more, the HP unit is meant to be your house's audio/video hub.

The centerpiece of the "Body Shop" bathroom is Philips's \$2,000 MiraVision — a mirror with a 17-inch LCD screen across the bottom so you can watch the news while brushing your teeth. The "Insomniac's Dream" bedroom features a 42-inch plasma TV that rises from the Cabinet Tronix chest at the foot of the bed.

In the "Digital Playground," you'll find a videogame system featuring big-screen action and the kind of high-impact sound you expect from home theater. Browsers are encouraged to experience the latest games in full-blown surround. The gear here includes an Xbox console, a Sony 55-inch rear-projection LCD TV, Artison speakers, and MartinLogan's Dynamo subwoofer.

You emerge from the room settings to a huge wall of TVs, including flat-panel plasma and LCD displays from brands like Pioneer, Samsung, and Panasonic, starting at \$3,000. Across from the TVs is the "On the Go" area, which highlights iPods, XM and Sirius satellite radios, Tivoli table radios, and more. Everything is out in the open for you to pick up and play with.

At the back of the showroom floor, I came across "The Big-Screen Adventure" — a room tricked out in \$250,000 of the finest home theater gear. Featuring a Sony Qualia 004 front projector, a 10-foot Stewart screen, a Kaleidescape DVD movie server, and JBL's 7.4 Synthesis Series surround speaker system, it made watching things like the famous speeder-bike chase in *Return of the Jedi* exhilarating. The setup even has D-Box Quest motion-simulator chairs that sway, tilt, and shake in sync with the onscreen action. If watching movies in this room doesn't motivate you to get out your credit card, nothing will!

Next door is the "Sound Stage," dedicated to demo'ing audio options. While there were traditional floorstanding speakers and plasma-friendly on-wall systems, most of the speakers sold here are "architectural" — ceiling, in-wall, and outdoor models. The store caters to people who want great sound but also want the speakers to blend into the look of their homes. Brands include Artison, Boston Acoustics, Polk Audio, MartinLogan, Sapphire, and Mirage.

Right before circling back to the front of the store, you come across the "Collaboratorium" — a glass-walled conference room where you review what you're planning to buy before breaking out the plastic.

RIGHT AT HOME

What Tweeter considers to be the most important part of the store is located, appropriately enough, right in the middle. Made up of four sets of tables and chairs, the "Design Studio" is where you sit down with a salesperson to discuss your situation and consider the possibilities.



While Tweeter would love to sell you a complete home theater in one visit, the reality is that people tend to buy systems in stages. “The first time a customer is here, he might just walk around and we’ll give him some ideas,” says store manager Hector Menna. “Next, we set up a visit where the salesperson, a field supervisor, and an installer go to his home to determine the best solution. Then we write up a proposal, and when the customer comes back in, we discuss it.”

“You don’t see a lot of boxes moving out of here,” explains Menna. “The idea isn’t to sell a TV but to sell a solution. And a big part of that is the in-home survey. Someone might come in thinking he wants a plasma TV for watching movies. But once we find out all the factors involved, we might recommend a different kind of TV.”

Because the store relies on salespeople to make specific recommendations and forgoes aisles and aisles of product displays, it doesn’t have to stock as many components as a typical Circuit City or Best Buy. “Until recently, this was a product-driven business,” says Menna. “But the amazing flexibility of digital gear has shifted the focus from individual products to systems. Also, people used to want everything to be Sony or everything to be Yamaha, depending on what components they already had. But our customers trust us to build a system that will accomplish what they want.”

While they can create completely customized systems, the members of the sales team also rely on packaged systems they

know are sure hits. “It simplifies the options,” says Menna. “We have packages where you can walk in and buy everything in the room.” For instance, the Family Night In system — which includes a 56-inch Samsung DLP TV, Denon components, and Polk speakers — sells for \$10,200. (The HP Media Center PC is extra.)

Another unusual aspect of the store is the emphasis on custom installation. “The vast majority of sales here involve some kind of installation,” says Menna, “which is why having the staff come out for a home visit is so important.”

About 60 of the larger stores in the Tweeter chain have been revamped along the lines of this one, with the rest scheduled to follow over the next five years. “Where we used to have three rooms devoted to audio, we’ve taken down one of those rooms and put up a package room with different settings and home theater displays priced from \$5,000 to \$18,000,” says Tweeter CEO Joe Maguire. “That concept comes right out of Vegas.”

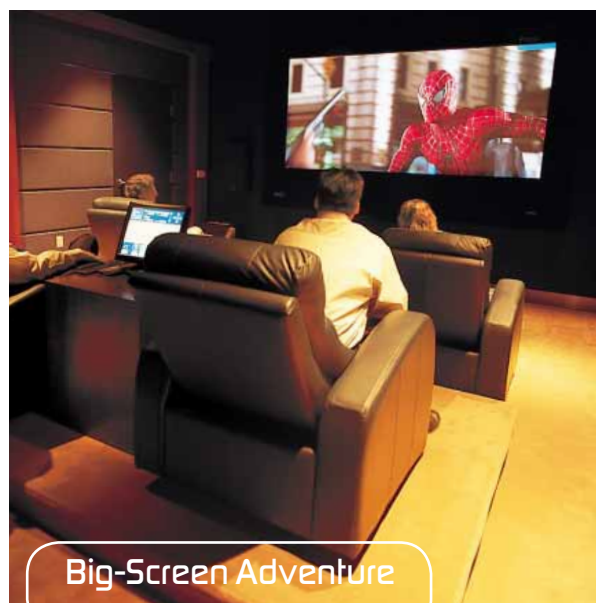
Maguire won’t say how closely the other stores will follow the Vegas model, but the goal is to make shopping easier and more enjoyable for customers from the minute they walk in until their products are installed. “A traditional electronics store is all about the stuff,” he says. “In Vegas, we answer the question, ‘What does the stuff do for you?’ ”

There’s no doubt that Tweeter’s new store is impressive, and it’s just common sense that people would want to audition gear in a relaxing environment where systems can be seen in the best possible light. But old-fashioned “tire kickers” are likely to be frustrated that they can’t check out a variety of components at a certain price, and some people might equate the store’s upscale settings with “too expensive for me.” Whether the Vegas concept ultimately succeeds remains to be seen. But for now it offers a stroll into the future that’s worth taking.

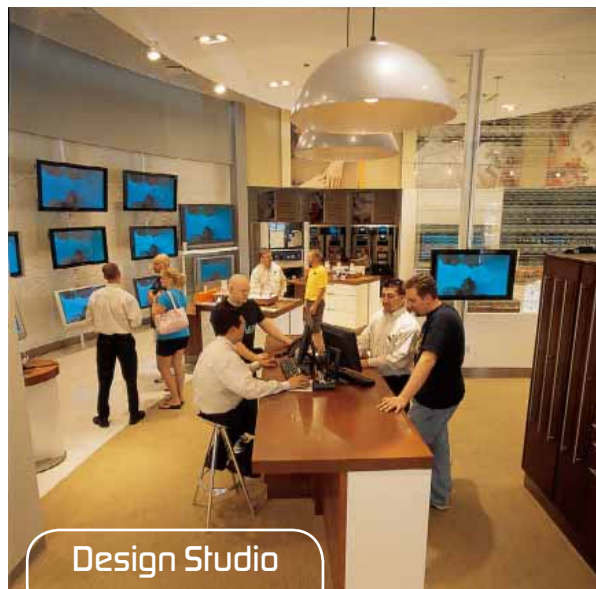
S&V



TV Showcase



Big-Screen Adventure



Design Studio

Your Favorite Store

Tell us about the best experience you’ve ever had shopping for home electronics. Send an e-mail with “My Favorite Store” in the subject line to soundandvision@hfmus.com, and we might feature that store in a future article.

My Digital

How I discovered the future of movies in my very own home

BY BARRY SONNENFELD

When we last visited director Barry Sonnenfeld (February/March 2004), he was a man without a home theater. Having sold his house in Amagansett, New York, and not yet ready to move to Telluride, Colorado, he had to watch DVDs in the screening room at his East Hampton, New York, offices. Barry has since settled into a house in East Hampton as he awaits his move to Colorado. Here he tells how setting up a home theater in his interim abode unexpectedly gave him a glimpse of cinema's future.

Accidentally selling our home in Amagansett four years before we intended to move to Telluride, I found myself living in a house with a huge basement that had the potential to be a home theater. The screening room in my old house was designed for 35mm film projection. The movies I directed had been edited in East Hampton, and we would often look at the work in progress in my home theater. Movies like *Men in Black* and *Wild Wild West* had hundreds of optical effects shots that we would screen for contrast, color, and sharpness. The room also had an analog Sony video projector — a great CRT model with 9-inch tubes.

The last film I directed, *Men in Black II*, although shot on film, spent most of

its life in the digital world. The film dailies were transferred to video and then edited digitally (as almost all films are, with the exception of Steven Spielberg's — Steven still insists on editing on film). All of our recruited-audience screenings — where we invite three hundred people who don't know how to spell to watch our movie and comment on it — were projected digitally. It wasn't until we had finished the project that we cut the negative and made film prints for the theaters. I was also getting sound mixes in Dolby Digital surround sent to me over the Internet, which were then downloaded to my computer and synced to the film projectors for viewing.

When I was in Los Angeles directing *MIB II* in 2001, Texas Instruments set up a demo of its latest digital projector in a local theater. The image was extraordinary — the only thing missing was the projector flicker we're used to seeing in movie theaters. I could tell that a change was quickly coming. When it came time to build a theater in my new home, I realized that the future was digital and that 35mm projection was no longer needed for either my work or my viewing pleasure.

Although the Sony CRT projector I had in the old house produced a beautiful image, it needed biyearly tweaking, and I really wanted to see what a 16:9 high-def digital projector could do. I inter-



PHOTOS BY MICHELLE HOOD

Adventure



I prefer living-room furniture in my home theater so I can nap or cuddle with loved ones. (That's *Get Shorty* on the screen.)





viewed several installers and hired the amusing, talented, and often ill John Tamburello. He drives a car that most junkyards would reject for not having enough panels worth scrapping. On the other hand, he says he doesn't worry about its being parked on the streets of New York City. He seems to live on pizza and cold coffee, and always exhibits flu-like symptoms, but is strangely very

smart, informed, and easy to work with.

The first decision we had to make was the size of the screen. I wanted a microperforated screen so the front left, center, and right speakers could be located behind it. I also wanted a fairly large image, even though the room is only 18 x 24½ feet. We went with a 12-foot-

wide screen, which Sweetie the wife thinks is too big and I think verges on too small. Because our room is located in a dedicated space without windows, we had 100% control over the room's ambience and were able to go with a relatively bright (1.3 gain) white screen. (Some projector manufacturers suggest using a lower-gain gray or silver screen in rooms that can't be completely darkened to help create the illusion of deeper blacks, since grayish blacks have been one of the drawbacks of DLP projectors.)

Our theater was designed with a soffit running across the back of the room that sends cool, fresh air across the enclosed projector. I didn't want to hear the fan of a projector during screenings, and

Installer John Tamburello, pizza and coffee out of sight but with a 102° temperature, helps me test the Qualia before moving it up into the soffit.

although this was quite an expensive architectural detail, it was worth it, since it also isolates the projector from cigar smoke. The cigars created additional expenses due to the installation of industrial-strength smoke eaters as well as a variably controlled ozonator to kill any smoke odors.

The biggest debate concerned the projector. At the last minute, after we'd decided on one manufacturer, several people suggested I check out the Sony Qualia 004. I drove into New York City and visited the Sony Concierge Qualia showroom, where I saw how incredible the projector is. It uses three 1,920 x 1,080-pixel SXRD (Silicon Crystal Reflective Display) panels and projects an extraordinary 1080p-resolution picture. The detail is crisp and sharp, and the contrast is easily controlled. I like to watch sports with lots of pop and color saturation, but use a slightly more muted setup for movies.

Ironically, the Qualia is very quiet, but having already built the room with ventilation in the soffit, and to keep it safe from the cigar smoke, we placed it in the soffit. If you're building a room knowing you're going to use this projector, don't go through the expense of enclosing and ventilating it. It's not only quiet but a beautiful piece of industrial design. (For more on SXRD technology, see May's "Object of Desire," available on the **S&V** Web site.)

Although my background is in cinematography, having shot movies for the Coen brothers (*Raising Arizona*, *Miller's Crossing*), Danny DeVito (*Throw Momma from the Train*), Rob Reiner (*When Harry Met Sally*, *Misery*), and Penny Marshall (*Big*), and although the films I have directed have a certain visual style, I'm equally concerned about sound. I believe the success of any movie is in proportion to the manly use of subwoofers. Comedies are no exception. I have two powerful Sunfire True Subwoofer EQ Signature subs. The rest of the speakers are made in Denmark by System Audio, and I'm happy with the clean, smooth sound.

The other big decision was the

Sunfire Theater Grand IV preamp/processor/tuner and the Sunfire Cinema Grand 400 amplifier, which puts out more power than we need. I don't like overly complicated remote controls and wouldn't let Tamburello set up a Crestron or any of those cool things that make life complicated, especially when you buy a new piece of equipment and have to reprogram the remote. Instead I decided on a Home Theater Master MX-800 universal remote, which we use in all of our other media areas as well.

I wanted to make sure that our room was dead enough, sound-wise. John and I talked about putting acoustic panels on the lower halves of the walls to dampen the sound, but with the plush furniture and deeply carpeted floor, we found that this wasn't necessary. And as a comedy director, I'm well aware of the importance of not deadening a space so much that peals of hysterical laughter get swallowed up by the room. I once had a terrible premiere of *Addams Family Values* at Paramount's new theater in Los Angeles, which was so dead that the audience never heard itself laugh. Sherry Lansing, the head of the studio, promised me she'd never have another comedy premiere there again.

Unfortunately, just as the home theater was completed, with the Qualia tuned to perfection and the subs reverberating in my stomach, I was hired to direct a film in Vancouver with Robin Williams titled *RV*. I won't be back home until the fall.

My hunch has proved correct, however. Digital will be standard procedure on *RV*. This will be the first movie I direct where we won't even make film dailies. The lab is transferring the film negative directly to high-definition tape, which will be fed into Avid editing stations. We'll cut and preview the movie on high-def tape for those people who don't know how to spell, and I'll be able to use my home theater to view those cuts of it. The first time we'll see the movie on film is when we make a print off the digital intermediate. I just hope it doesn't hurt the comedy.

S&V

"I don't like overly complicated remote controls and wouldn't let the installer set up a Crestron or any of those cool things that make life complicated."

MOVIES EDITED BY JOSEF KREBS / GAMES EDITED BY DREW THOMPSON / MUSIC EDITED BY KEN RICHARDSON

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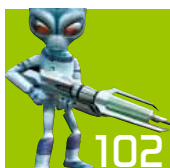
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THE OSCAR KNOCKOUT COMES TO DVD

THE SCORE

- SUPREME
- EXCELLENT
- GOOD
- FAIR
- POOR



Lady of the Ring

EASTWOOD, FREEMAN, AND SWANK WIN THE DAY

MILLION DOLLAR BABY

Warner

Movie ●●●● Picture/Sound ●●●●

Extras ●●●

The late-career masterworks of director Clint Eastwood — *Unforgiven*, *Mystic River*, and now *Million Dollar Baby* — all share the same basic qualities: simplicity, emotional directness, and economy of scale. Most important, though, is their singular lack of sentimentality. This is a crucial element for movies that tend to dwell on guilt and regret and that often feature characters with no real chance of redemption. *Million Dollar Baby* may be the ultimate expression of this eloquent yet unspoken aesthetic. It's the boxing movie for those who don't care for the sport but who appreciate the sort of natural, intimate, character-driven tale that Hollywood seldom delivers — in this or any other era.

Eastwood is far too smart to attempt a

movie like this without plenty of help. He surrounds himself with the best actors available and gives them the room they need to shine. The result is the rare film that genuinely earns its two major acting Oscars. **Hilary Swank** (Best Actress) is letter-perfect as Maggie, the dirt-poor thirty-something boxer who claws her way to a title shot, and **Morgan Freeman** (Best Supporting Actor) was born to play the aging, world-weary boxer whose narration gives the film much of its depth. Eastwood is just as convincing as Maggie's cantankerous trainer, though he had to settle for another set of Best Directing and Best Picture Oscars.

Million Dollar Baby is no visual feast. It takes place in dark, dingy gyms, arenas, and tenements, but the DVD picture contains every bit of grime and drop of blood. Dark scenes are perfect, sustaining the somber mood without obliterating the film's remarkable sharpness and detail. The char-

acters live on "the periphery of society," as Eastwood likes to say, and their harsh world comes across in the stark realism of the film's every frame. The restrained soundtrack skillfully blends dialogue with Eastwood's own melancholy score, exploding into surround sound glory in fight scenes that approach *Raging Bull*-style ferocity.

The extras on the two DVDs are a little thin, though this is mainly because the ever-laconic Eastwood declines to sit for a commentary. Instead we get two mini-documentaries (totaling 30 minutes) that rely on typical cast-and-crew interviews. But insights on the director's creative technique — best summed up as follow your gut, trust your colleagues, and don't think too much — make the material worthwhile. There's also a roundtable discussion with Eastwood, Swank, and Freeman (recorded the day after the Academy Awards ceremony), but moderator James Lipton spoils the vibe with his relentlessly fawning manner. A bonus CD offers the beautiful score in stereo. This set is a perfect introduction to the many talents of Hollywood's most unlikely Renaissance man. **[PG-13] English and French, Dolby Digital 5.1; letterboxed (2.35:1) and anamorphic widescreen; one dual-layer disc, one single-layer disc, and one CD.** — **KEN KORMAN**



HITCH

Sony
Movie ●●●●
Picture/Sound ●●●●●
Extras ●●●●

The ever-charismatic **Will Smith** may be perfectly cast here as

New York City's "love doctor" — the man who coaches hopelessly smitten guys into the arms of their beloveds — but that doesn't help this romantic comedy work up much passion of its own. Smith and co-star **Kevin James** (TV's *The King of Queens*) do manage a few outsized laughs as Hitch himself falls prey to the love bug, but the real star of the film is in the background. Director **Andy Tennant** shot the movie all over lower Manhattan, and the sharp, detailed images show this idealized setting as the ultimate adult playground. Warm, natural skin tones make all those beautiful New Yorkers even more attractive. The 5.1-channel mix is subdued, the soundtrack leaning instead on pop tunes that fairly scream "Yuppies in Love."

Extras include a gag reel, deleted scenes, an uninspired half-hour documentary, and the "I Thing" music video by Amerie. [PG-13] English, Dolby Digital 5.1; French, Dolby Surround; letterboxed (2.35:1) and anamorphic widescreen; dual layer. — **KEN KORMAN**



CURSED

Dimension
Movie ●●●●
Picture/Sound ●●●●●
Extras ●●●●

Director **Wes Craven** and writer **Kevin Williamson** have

adapted their patented *Scream* formula — contemporary, wisecracking hottie stars in cool horror-movie peril — to make this modern Wolfman retread. Unfortunately, the magic is marred by laughable special effects, especially the Tasmanian Devil-like creatures. The images — dark 2.35:1 widescreen compositions with pale neon colors — take a back seat to the coming-at-ya jolts of the Dolby Digital 5.1 soundtrack. Extras, including a cast-and-crew commentary and four documentaries, are like the script — strictly déjà vu. [NR] English and French, Dolby Digital 5.1; letterboxed (2.35:1) and anamorphic widescreen; dual layer. — **MEL NEUHAUS**

THE MACHINIST

Paramount
Movie ●●●●●
Picture/Sound ●●●●●
Extras ●●●●●

"Alfred Hitchcock on steroids" best describes this intense and disturbing psychological thriller from director **Brad**

Anderson (*Session 9*). But it will likely be remembered as the movie for which actor **Christian Bale** actually lost a third of his body weight (63 pounds) to play a character who hasn't slept in a year and may well be losing his mind. The bleak, desaturated visuals ratchet up the tension, as does an eerily atmospheric soundtrack anchored by an intentionally Hitchcockian score — the estate of Bernard Herrmann practically deserves royalties. Extras include a director's commentary, eight deleted scenes, and a half-hour documentary. [R] English, Dolby Digital 5.1 and Dolby Surround; letterboxed (2.35:1) and anamorphic widescreen; dual layer. — **KEN KORMAN**



Reflections in a swollen eye: Christian Bale, *The Machinist*

STAR TREK: INSURRECTION

Paramount
Movie ●●●●●
Picture/Sound ●●●●●
Extras ●●●●●



Star Trek: Insurrection (1998), in which Captain Picard and the crew of the Enterprise work to save a paradise planet in defiance of Federation orders, isn't as dramatic as the title

promises. Its main assets are its characterizations, especially **F. Murray Abraham's** over-the-top bad-guy turn. Images on this two-disc set are fine, with clean reproduction of even the smallest computer-generated details like background fish and birds. Sound effects are convincingly placed, but sometimes there's a hint of distortion (less so in DTS). Disc 1 has a pop-up text commentary, and Disc 2 is filled with a making-of documentary, eight production featurettes, storyboards, and deleted scenes, including an alternate ending. [PG] English, Dolby Digital 5.1, DTS 5.1, and Dolby Surround; French, Dolby Surround; letterboxed (2.35:1) and anamorphic widescreen; two dual-layer discs. — **SOL LOUIS SIEGEL**

COACH CARTER

Paramount
Movie ●●●●●
Picture/Sound ●●●●●
Extras ●●●●●

The true story of California high-school basketball coach Ken Carter, who famously locked his overachieving team

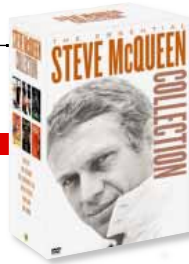
GOOFY GOOD GUYS

These days, it seems like all the bad guys in the world have it in for America. Thankfully, someone is always looking out for us, whether they're dynamic marionettes or top-secret teenagers. Both these films have lots of fun with the spy movie genre. **D.E.B.S.** (Sony; Movie ●●●●, Picture/Sound ●●●●●, Extras ●●●●) is aimed squarely at family audiences. But **TEAM AMERICA: WORLD POLICE** (Paramount; Movie ●●●●●, Picture/Sound ●●●●●, Extras ●●●●) — written by **Matt Stone** and co-written and directed by **Trey Parker**, the creators of *South Park* — has something to offend everyone.

The 2.35:1 anamorphic widescreen images in both have reds, whites, and blues that practically jump off the screen, although *D.E.B.S.* manages to pack in a higher level of detail. Despite being comedy spoofs, the flicks have deadly serious Dolby Digital 5.1 soundtracks. They'll rattle your subwoofer and energize your surround speakers with explosions and bullets that fly in all directions. *D.E.B.S.* comes with two commentaries (one by director **Angela Robinson**, the other by the cast), deleted scenes, a making-of featurette, and the "Into the Morning" music video by the Weekend. *Team America's* extras include an introduction, nine production featurettes, deleted scenes, and animated storyboards. — **BRANDON GRAFIUS**



Rebel



THE ESSENTIAL STEVE McQUEEN COLLECTION

Warner, 7 discs

Movies ●●●●●

Picture/Sound ●●●●● **Extras** ●●●●●

Rebel



THE COMPLETE JAMES DEAN COLLECTION

Warner, 6 discs

Movies ●●●●●

Picture/Sound ●●●●● **Extras** ●●●●●

Films	New to DVD: Never So Few (1959), The Cincinnati Kid (1965), Tom Horn (1980). New transfer in two-disc set: Bullitt (1968). New edition: The Getaway (1972). Reissue: Papillon (1973).	New to DVD: East of Eden (1955). New transfer: Rebel Without a Cause (1955). Same as separate edition: Giant (1956). All three are two-disc sets.
Notable directors	Sam Peckinpah (<i>Getaway</i>), Norman Jewison (<i>Kid</i>), John Sturges (<i>Never</i>).	Elia Kazan (<i>Eden</i>), Nicholas Ray (<i>Rebel</i>), George Stevens (<i>Giant</i>).
Acting method or Method Acting	Speak softly and carry a big shtick: long blue-eyed stares, animal ease at rest and in motion, unexpected grins. Languid with machines and women.	Second that emoting: pleading stares, slouching stumbles, sudden outbursts. He hesitates, tears words from within, and strikes a perfect pose.
Range and power shown here	Array of distinctive performances , from quicksilver kid who steals scenes from Frank Sinatra in <i>Never</i> to more meditative characters in <i>Papillon</i> and <i>Tom Horn</i> .	Although all films were made over just three years , his thrillingly instinctual and magnetic acting grows rapidly richer with each movie.
DVD quality	Picture: Excellent contrast and rich colors. Sometimes overly grainy but detailed and bright, as if shot today. Sound: Crisp. The 5.1 mixes of <i>Papillon</i> and <i>Never</i> and the 4.0 mix of <i>Bullitt</i> are mainly front-channel.	Picture: <i>Rebel</i> has saturated colors, <i>Giant</i> luminous tones, and <i>Eden</i> a brown/yellow period look. All are a little short on detail. Sound: <i>Giant</i> could use more breadth, but the 5.1 mixes of <i>Eden</i> and <i>Rebel</i> have clean separation and convincing effects.
Extras	Commentaries: one for <i>Bullitt</i> , two each for <i>Getaway</i> and <i>Kid</i> . Documentaries: two (each feature-length). Featurettes: three.	Commentaries: one for each film. Documentaries: one feature-length and five hour-long ones. Featurettes: four. Also: deleted scenes, interviews, screen tests, etc.

out of the gym when they under-achieved academically, gets the full Hollywood treatment in this sturdy if long-winded movie. Wearing his principles proudly on his sleeve, **Samuel L. Jackson** was born to play the title role, but the rest of the cast shines just as bright thanks to a script that refuses to stereotype those tough, underprivileged kids. Picture and sound are both finely tuned, bringing real grit and excitement to the in-your-face game sequences.

Extras include a featurette on the real Ken Carter, a short documentary about how his games were recreated for the film, Twista's "Hope" music video featuring Faith Evans, and 10 minutes of highly entertaining deleted scenes. **[PG-13] English, Dolby Digital 5.1 and Dolby Surround; French, Dolby Digital 5.1; letterboxed (2.35:1) and anamorphic widescreen; dual layer.** — **KEN KORMAN**

Bamboozled: Robert Ryan in *House of Bamboo*

HOUSE OF BAMBOO

20th Century Fox

Movie ●●●●● **Picture/Sound** ●●●●●

Extras ●●

FORTY GUNS

20th Century Fox

Movie ●●●●● **Picture/Sound** ●●●●●

Extras None



In the crime thriller *House of Bamboo* (1955), maverick director **Sam Fuller** melds stunning Japanese locations, bizarre interrelationships, and sizzling violence. The crystal-clear, restored 2.55:1 CinemaScope images burst with vibrant hues — a far cry from the old faded red prints. The 4.0 sound (remixed from the original stereo tracks) adds oomph to the shoot-outs. Noir authorities Alain Silver and James Ursini provide commentary, and there's rare newsreel footage of the director and stars.

Fuller's revisionist Western *Forty Guns* (1957) stars **Barbara Stanwyck** as a "high ridin' woman with a whip" (according to the film's ballad), whose greed is overwhelmed only by her obsession with government gunman **Barry Sullivan**. The black-and-white 2.35:1 widescreen picture is near pristine, with

only occasional graininess and surface wear. The mono track is also clean and booms with resonance. **House of Bamboo:** **[NR] English, Dolby Digital 4.0; French and Spanish, 2-channel mono; letterboxed (2.55:1) and anamorphic widescreen; dual layer.** **Forty Guns:** **[NR] English, Dolby Digital stereo and 2-channel mono; Spanish, 2-channel mono; pan-and-scan, letterboxed (2.35:1), and anamorphic widescreen; dual layer.** — **MEL NEUHAUS**

ASSAULT ON PRECINCT 13 [2005]

Universal

Movie ●●●●● **Picture/Sound** ●●●●●

Extras ●●●●●



In this remake of John Carpenter's suspenseful low-budget classic, policemen and inmates once again combine forces, barricade a soon-to-be abandoned precinct, and hold off the bad guys — this time, corrupt cops wielding the latest in lethal toys. While the new version doesn't have the raw tension of the original, it's slick and entertaining. Images are detailed, but poor contrast mars crispness. The sound, though, is first-rate, loaded with surround-channel action that sends gunshots whizzing by

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your ear and immerses you in the pulsing music. Interesting extras include a commentary by the creative team, engaging deleted scenes, and five featurettes. [R] English, Dolby Digital and DTS 5.1; French, Dolby Digital 5.1; letterboxed (2.35:1) and anamorphic widescreen; dual layer. — RAD BENNETT



RESCUE ME: SEASON 1

Sony

Series ●●●●●

Picture/Sound ●●●●●

Extras ●●●●●

This post-9/11 series is as compelling as any

network TV drama currently in production. Like many of his comrades in the New York City Fire Department, Tommy Gavin (a very convincing **Denis Leary**) is equal parts heroic, insecure, juvenile, self-destructive, and compassionate. Episode after episode, Leary and co-writer/producer Peter Tolan find something compelling to say about the fire-fighting life, where hours of boredom are interspersed with dramatic situations most of us will never experience.

All 13 episodes on this three-disc set have excellent color and lots of detail and contrast in the many action scenes. The Dolby Surround sound is also quite involving, with appropriately boomy sonics and ambient effects when the hoses come out and the men attack a blaze. Extras include commentaries on the first and last episodes by Leary and Tolan, four worthwhile making-of featurettes, and a fun collection of bloopers and deleted scenes. [TV-MA] English, Dolby Surround; letterboxed (1.78:1) and anamorphic widescreen; three dual-layer discs. — MARC HOROWITZ

MOONLIGHTING: SEASONS 1 & 2

Lions Gate

Series ●●●●●

Picture/Sound ●●●●●

Extras ●●●●●



When glamorous but broke ex-model Maddie Hayes and wiseass detective David Addison first appeared in 1985, they instantly became TV's new favorite odd couple. The

tension and rapid-fire dialogue between the two, as played by **Cybill Shepherd** and **Bruce Willis**, made the series snap, crackle, and pop, while daring and innovative private-eye plot lines allowed it to sizzle. Now, it's more of a simmer, since so many other shows have imitated the original, but it's still very entertaining. This six-

disc set contains the feature-length pilot and 23 hour-long episodes. Images are crisp, bright, and beautiful, with ideal contrast. The clean mono sound allows all the bickering banter to come through loud and clear. Willis and Shepherd are joined by creator Glenn Gordon Caron and various production crew members on informative commentaries for five episodes. The three featurettes are also better than usual. [NR] English, Dolby Digital 2-channel mono; full frame (1.33:1); six dual-layer discs. — RAD BENNETT

LE NOTTE BIANCHE (WHITE NIGHTS)

The Criterion Collection

Movie ●●●●●

Picture/Sound ●●●●●

Extras ●●●●●

DIVORCE ITALIAN STYLE

The Criterion Collection

Movie ●●●●●

Picture/Sound ●●●●●

Extras ●●●●●



In *White Nights* (1957)

Marcello Mastroianni shows his great emotional range as Mario, a young man going through the mill of unrequited infatuation with a girl he meets on a bridge (**Maria Schell**).

Director **Luchino Visconti** uses the actor's charm and self-deprecating humor to add poignancy to **Fyodor Dostoyevsky's**

lessons in love. In *Divorce Italian Style* (1961), Mastroianni's comic talents are shown even more as he plays Ferdinando, a vain, aristocratic lounge lizard plotting to kill his wife in a crime of passion — if only he can find her a lover.

The images in both films are clean, except for occasional edge damage in *Nights*. *Divorce's* sun-drenched Sicily is filled with crisp, dazzlingly white shirts and deep black suits. The picture of *Nights* is detailed even in the shadowy exteriors. Characters in the foreground, atmospheric street types in the midground, and cityscapes far in the background are all distinct. Sound on both titles is a clear mono. Both sets have cast-and-crew interviews and screen tests — more substantial ones on *Divorce's* two-disc set, which also contains a 40-minute documentary. **Both:** [NR] Italian, Dolby Digital mono (with English subtitles); anamorphic widescreen. *White Nights:* letterboxed (1.66:1); dual layer. *Divorce:* letterboxed (1.85:1); two dual-layer discs. — JOSEF KREBS



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THQ (PS2, Xbox)

Game ●●●● Graphics/Sound ●●●●

Ike. The Red Scare. Tupperware. That's what the people of Earth are thinking about in *Destroy All Humans!* Flipping the script on *Space Invaders*, this game casts you as Crypto, an alien armed with an addictive array of futuristic weapons and mental abilities. You'll read minds to reveal those deep Earthling thoughts. ("Boy, do I love my new Edsel. It's a classic in the making!") You'll also vaporize civilians (just like your brethren do in *War of the Worlds*) and trash towns from the comfort of your flying saucer. Humorous dialogue roasts idyllic 1950s America while a spooky score toasts the era's cheesy sci-fi flicks. And you'll know you're well on your way to world domination when you're surrounded by screams. Combine all that with expansive environments à la *Grand Theft Auto* (yahoo-run family farms, top-secret government sites), the explosive mayhem of *Mercenaries*, and the twisted satire of Tim Burton's *Mars Attacks!* and you get gameplay so hard to resist, you'll feel like you're caught in the grip of Crypto's Abducto Beam. —DREW THOMPSON



FANTASTIC FOUR

Activision (all consoles)

Game ●● Graphics/Sound ●●●●

At least the game is better than the movie. Marginally better. Sure, it's cool to let players geek out with all four members of Marvel's first family: malleable Mr. F, see-through Sue Storm, her blazing bro Johnny, and dermatological disaster The Thing. But the action isn't balanced, with levels that hardly play to the strengths and weaknesses of each character. However, if you get giddy beating up bad guys over and over again, level after level, to the drone of hopelessly flat zips and bangs in passable 480p, then by all means . . . lame on! —J.M.G.



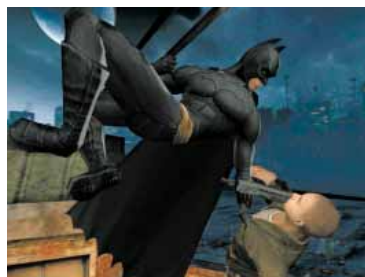
CONKER: LIVE & RELOADED

Microsoft (Xbox)

Game ●●●●

Graphics/Sound ●●●●●●

Forget the Farrelly Brothers — Conker is crasser. The raunchy squirrel pisses on fiery demons, leaps onto breast-shaped sunflowers, and lays waste (!) to an opera-singing mound of manure. This, oddly, is all quite fun, because an occasional chuckle does crap, er, crop up. And the game isn't just a toilet-humor marathon. Violent parody of movies like *The Matrix* and *Saving Private Ryan* is made awesomely gruesome thanks to a full-on 5.1 tornado of bullets. And visual splendor abounds, especially in "fur shading" — think *Sulley of Monsters, Inc.* (only real-time, down to the follicle). Wait, did I mention the poo monster? —JON M. GIBSON



BATMAN BEGINS

EA (all consoles)

Game ●●● Graphics/Sound ●●●●●

The Dark Knight has never been dimmer — but that's a good thing. Much better than the usual licensed schlock, this bat-game borrows from the best — namely, *Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell*, ripping off its sly use of diffused light and shadow. This means our Kevlar-clad crusader can slowly stalk his prey or, as conceived by the film's fight choreographer, execute freestyle clips 'n' kicks straight outta some '80s break-dancing bash. It's fluid (if a bit goofy), but good ol' Bruce looks cool doing it, thanks to glossy 720p visuals that bear an eerily realistic resemblance to the actors (backed by cast voiceovers). Still, that doesn't make up for EA's *Catwoman* — which was schlock licensed from schlock. —J.M.G.

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MEDAL OF HONOR: EUROPEAN ASSAULT

EA (all consoles)

Game ●●● Graphics/Sound ●●●●●

After *Rising Sun* sank like a stone, the *Medal of Honor* series went back to boot camp. Now this World War II first-person shooter is in fighting form again for a *European Assault*, but it's quickly hobbled by newly added arcade-style gimmicks — like a *Matrix*-inspired power-up that slows time and grants you invincibility and unlimited ammo. Morphing the game's hero into Neo doesn't make sense in a series famous for its historically accurate battles. Sparsely detailed environments also earn the game a demotion (fortunately, the action is usually too intense for you to notice), as does the absence of online play. Even though your screen doesn't benefit, your speakers will, thanks to the superb, sweeping score and realistic enemy fire that will have you taking cover behind your couch. —D.T.

Two from the Foes

THE LAST GREAT ROCK ALBUM(S)?



FOO FIGHTERS

In Your Honor

RCA

Music ●●●●● DualDisc Mix ●●●●●

Extras ●●●

Foo Fighters 5 is a mighty big enchilada, especially in its double DualDisc edition. That's right, two DualDiscs: an "electric" album backed by a DVD documentary and an "acoustic" album with a surround mix on DVD-Audio. There's also a 16-page booklet, and the whole thing is housed in a removable slipcase. And, oh yeah, it's modestly called *In Your Honor*.

All of that might seem like an unintentional satire of rock pomp. But *In Your Honor* is everything it means to be. Singer, guitarist, and bandleader Dave Grohl has said he wanted no middle ground, so the electric disc is as hard as nails while the acoustic disc is a low-key, melodic gem. The entire set is a testament to the range and tightness of the Foes.

From the opening guitar-army onslaught of the title track to the ringing feedback finale of "End over End," the electric album is an unrelenting blast of aggressive hard rock. It peaks with the powerful one-two of "The Last Song" and "Free Me." The first is a cathartic kissoff that sounds like the U2 of "I Will Follow" given a swift kick by the Sex Pistols of "God Save the Queen." And "Free Me" has furious, Led Zeppelin-

like riffing and some of the most intense screaming on record. The disc plays through like one long song, which isn't a complaint but praise for its sustained ferocity. And it sounds great in the beefier "enhanced stereo" on the DVD side. The 20-minute making-of documentary includes interviews with all four Foes. Just one complaint: why is there no surround mix of the electric album, especially since the mix of the acoustic one turned out so brilliantly?

Led Zep's John Paul Jones makes an appearance on the acoustic disc, as does Norah Jones, who adds piano and vocals to the lovely bossa-nova "Virginia Moon." The diversity of settings is shown to maximum effect in Elliot Scheiner's six-channel mix, where he apportions the musical elements more or less democratically. The mix is more about immersion than segregation, and the tracks (especially the acoustic guitars) have a crystalline clarity. Grohl sounds like a different person here; it's hard to believe that the nuanced singer of "Miracle" is the same guy who shreds his cords on the other disc. The acoustic album reaches its zenith in "Over and Out," where guitars, vibes, strings, and tomtoms set a haunting scene.

Grohl and the Foes are to be hailed for dreaming big and hitting the mark with *In Your Honor*. It is, quite simply, an awesome achievement. — PARKE PUTERBAUGH

SYSTEM OF A DOWN

Mezmerize

American/Columbia

Music ●●●●● Sound ●●●●●



We won't know the full extent of System of a Down's third "album," *Mezmerize/Hypnotize*, until the second disc drops this fall. But for

now, *Mezmerize*'s filler-free assault nails its targets with precision-guided metal/rock. On "B.Y.O.B.," singer Serj Tankian aims his biting black humor at bloody Iraq while knockout thrash riffs and "la la la"-fueled pop raise an eyebrow.

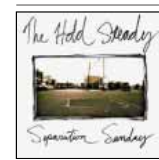
Daron Malakian wages six-string devastation on "Revenge" and sarcastically announces "My cock can walk right through the door" in the anti-authoritarian "Cigar." The New Wave-y "Old School Hollywood" and the heartbreaking "Lost in Hollywood" conclude the first hit of what may turn out to be a lethal double dose. — JEFF PERLAH

THE HOLD STEADY

Separation Sunday

Frenchkiss

Music ●●●●● Sound ●●●●●



The Hold Steady's Craig Finn is the raconteur at the end of the bar whose jokes are worth sticking around for. The former

leader of the Minneapolis-based Lifter Puller has relocated and ignited the Brooklyn scene with two albums of visceral social commentary. His favorite subject is women who are mostly speed-freaks, looking to religion to calm their minds. On paper, Finn is a smart-guy poet, but the guitars striking anthem power chords make him the rocker of his dreams. — ROB O'CONNOR

AUDIOSLAVE

Out of Exile

Interscope/Epic

Music ●●●●● Sound ●●●●●



It's difficult to say whether the band or the producer should get more credit for this solid sophomore album. Sure, Audio-

slave is a perfectly fine hard-rock outfit, playing looser and with more swing than parent groups Soundgarden and Rage Against the Machine. But Rick Rubin's production — or really, lack of production — turns *Out of Exile* into something special. His love for 1970s rock has been clear since he recorded the Cult, but this may be the warmest and most

TRACKING SURROUND



Bristling at Stereo

MIKE METTLER TALKS WITH PORCUPINE TREE'S STEVEN WILSON

Your progressive-rock band's most recent albums, 2002's *In Absentia* and the new *Deadwing* (Lava/Atlantic), are both available in DVD-Audio editions from DTS.

When you were mixing the last one, you said you didn't want to be influenced by any other surround mixes. Did the same philosophy hold true for *Deadwing*?

Yeah. To me, every time you mix a record in surround, it's like the first time you've mixed a record, period. For some other people, there seems to be a set way that they kind of naturally fall into when mixing for surround: the vocals are always in the front, and so are the drums. But a Porcupine Tree record, by definition, has more elements to play with — a lot of textural and sound-design stuff, and a lot of keyboards. So I asked our surround mixer, **Elliot Scheiner**, "Can we try the vocal in the middle of the room? Can we put the bass drum in the middle of the room?" Things like that just sounded better to me.

Did knowing beforehand that you were going to do *Deadwing* in surround affect the writing process?

I didn't compose differently, but the way we tracked was different. I was very much thinking in terms of having three separate vocal parts interlock in places where, in the past, we may have had a set of harmony vocals. I thought, "Oh, that's gonna sound

great: I'll put one in the back, and then one over here, and then one over there. . . ."

On previous albums, I may have bounced stuff down to a stereo pair, but I won't even do that anymore, because now I can spread everything out.

Does music in surround have a future?

I think it's got a future, absolutely. . . . It often comes down to just one record. In the 1970s, Pink Floyd's *The Dark Side of the Moon* came along, and people really wanted to hear that on a good stereo system. In the '80s, it was Dire Straits' *Brothers in Arms* that did it for the CD as a format. [That album has just been released on surround SACD in Europe and is expected here imminently on DualDisc. — *Ed.*] In the 21st century, we're the ones who are pushing the envelope.

I'd really like to think that *Deadwing* could be the album that will make people want to hear music in surround. Which is nice because, in the end, it comes down to the art, not just the technology.

For more with Steven Wilson, go to the S&V Web site.

organic sound he's achieved. The bass sounds like a bass, drums don't overwhelm, and there's an inviting rehearsal-room ambience. (You can even hear the rhythm guitar drop out when **Tom Morello** takes a solo.) Rubin has also gotten **Chris Cornell** to forgo his usual shouting to the rafters and sing in a more direct, personable style. Arena rock with heart is what it's all about, and so goes the best of Audioslave's material — like "Your Time Has Come," with its chunky riffs and anti-suicide message. Even the more intense Rage/Soundgarden moments in the disc's second half are convincing, though Rubin neglected to tell Morello that making worm noises on guitar during "The Worm" wasn't the sharpest of ideas. — **BRETT MILANO**

THE BLACK EYED PEAS

Monkey Business

A&M

Music ●●●● **Sound** ●●●●●

The purists who once adored them might dis them now, but the Black Eyed Peas dish out happy hip-hop that's nothing to snicker at. In fact, *Monkey Business* shines even brighter than 2003's *Elephunk*. The fluid, buoyant "Pump It" rides the surf of Dick Dale's "Misirlou." Meanwhile, "They Don't Want Music" is a trumpet- and sax-tootin' soul banger. Like its predecessor, this album features several guests — from **Justin Timberlake** to **James Brown**. But the Peas are clearly in charge: **will.i.am** croons poignantly on "Gone Going," and **Fergie** toys with her male cohorts as she drops sexy vocals on "My Humps." *Business* is flourishing. — **JEFF PERLAH**

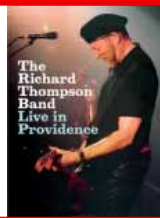
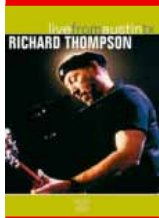
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SLEATER-KINNEY

The Woods

Sub Pop

Music ●●●● Sound ●●●



Whereas *All Hands on the Bad One* was a "crossover" album to love and *One Beat* was a punk cry to rally around, this one

(driven by Flaming Lips producer **Dave Fridmann**) is a dirty bonecrusher, all Hammer of the Gals. The commotion and distortion can get wearying when they intrude on a ballad like "Modern Girl." Still, the faithful will get shivers from **Corin Tucker's** undiminished voice ("Land ho!" indeed), **Carrie Brownstein's** newly Led Ladyland guitar, and **Janet Weiss's** topping-herself-with-every-album drumming. There are blunt lyrics, too: "A family feud / The Red and the Blue now / It's Truth against Truth / I'll see you in hell, I don't mind." And two classics bookend the album: "The Fox," which stalks and pummels, and "Let's Call It Love" / "Night Light," joined by a jam (!) for a marathon of 15 minutes (!!). *The Woods* may often be a thicket of racket, but it's Sleater-Kinney on their own terms. We wouldn't want them any other way. — KEN RICHARDSON

RIDDLE OF STEEL

Got This Feelin'

Ascetic

Music ●●●● Sound ●●●●

These guys share their name with a pen-and-paper role-playing game steeped in medieval/Renaissance swordsmanship. But they're from St. Louis, and as you'll hear from the first two tracks of *Got This Feelin'*, they pledge allegiance

to the royalty of both King Crimson and Queens of the Stone Age. Or as their press release says, "Tempo changes are sexy, kids" — especially when delivered with hooks as hot as these. Guitarist **Andrew Elstner** and bassist **Jimmy Vavak** focus the dynamics of the previous *Python* and, backed by compelling new drummer **Rob Smith**, deliver a mostly Jawbox-dropping set. From the circular riff of "This Is a House of Lies" and the choppy chords of "Detroit Flu" to the album's Floydian coda, "Aquiline," Riddle of Steel cuts like a knight. — KEN RICHARDSON

FOUNTAINS OF WAYNE

Out-of-State Plates

Virgin

Music ●●●● Sound ●●●●

THE POSIES

Every Kind of Light

Rykodisc

Music ●●●● Sound ●●●●

Hard to say what's more fun: listening to all the non-album and previously unreleased tracks that comprise Fountains of Wayne's double CD of rarities, *Out-of-State Plates*, or reading the hilarious cut-by-cut commentary by partners-in-rhyme bandleaders **Adam Schlesinger** and **Chris Collingwood**. There's the pluperfectly power-popping "Maureen" (of whose "muh-muh-muh-muh" hook Schlesinger notes that "a couple more like this and people will think that Chris really does stutter"). Then there's the hazy-shade-of-winter guitar of "Elevator Up" ("a song about drugs," writes Collingwood, "culled from extensive research with people who have actually done

them"). These guys are undeniably musical wiseacres, but they're also true music fans, as underscored by the straight-ahead covers of ELO ("Can't Get It Out of My Head"), Jackson Browne ("These Days"), and even Britney Spears ("... Baby One More Time").

Like Fountains of Wayne, Posies co-leaders **Ken Stringfellow** and **Jon Auer** wear their influences on their sleeves — though the cuffs are more Edwardian. Reunited for *Every Kind of Light*, their first new collection in seven years, the Posies will have you thinking late Beatles ("That Don't Fly") and Zombies ("All in a Day's Work"), and with the same state-likeness, too. That a number of songs here ("Could He Treat You Better," "Sweethearts of Rodeo Drive") deal with the current climate in Washington makes reference-point sense, too. After all, back in the late 1960s, no one said pop and politics couldn't mix.

— BILLY ALTMAN



THE CASH FAMILY

"I hear the Man a-comin' / He's rolling 'round the bend — on 104 tracks!" Or so you'll sing in praise of the Man in Black's big boxed set, *The Legend* (Columbia/Legacy). His name, of course, is **JOHNNY CASH**, and the box serves up four CDs of songs that include seven previously unreleased performances. Spring for the deluxe

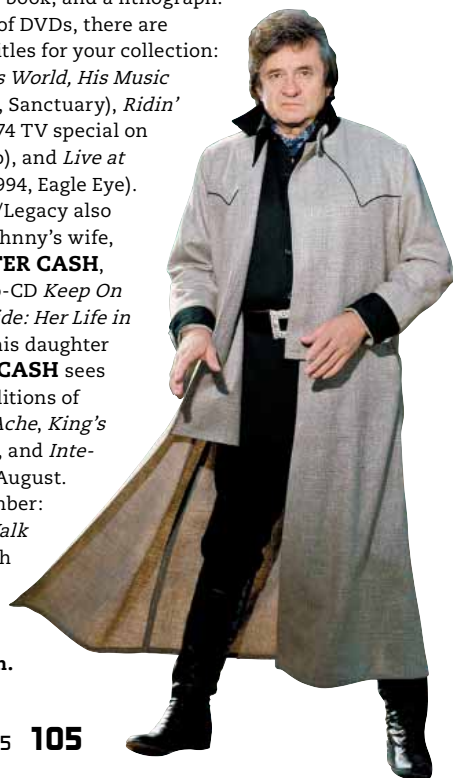
limited edition and you also get a bonus CD of his 1954 radio debut, a bonus DVD of his 1980 TV special, a coffeetable book, and a lithograph.

Speaking of DVDs, there are other Cash titles for your collection:

The Man, His World, His Music (1968-69 doc, Sanctuary), *Ridin' the Rails* (1974 TV special on trains, Rhino), and *Live at Montreux* (1994, Eagle Eye).

Columbia/Legacy also celebrates Johnny's wife, **JUNE CARTER CASH**, with the two-CD *Keep On the Sunny Side: Her Life in Music*. And his daughter **ROSANNE CASH** sees Expanded Editions of *Seven Year Ache*, *King's Record Shop*, and *Interiors* in late August.

Come November: the biopic *Walk the Line*, with **Joaquin Phoenix** and **Reese Witherspoon**.



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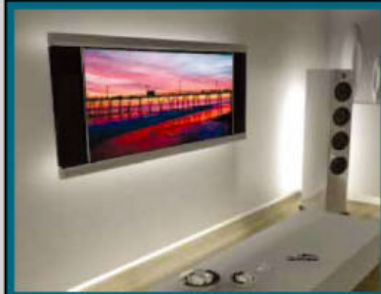
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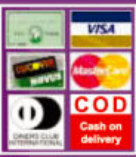
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Steve Buscemi

I hear you're calling in from the set of *The Sopranos*.

I'm directing the next episode — Episode 5. We're in pre-production right now. It's the fourth episode I've directed.

You also recently directed a movie, *Lonesome Jim*.

Yeah, it's a comedy about a young man from Indiana who tries to make it as a writer in New York. But he can't hack it, so he moves back in with his family and has a nervous breakdown in the comfort of his own home. The problem is that his older brother is even more depressed than Jim, so they compete to see who will have a breakdown first.

Will it be in theaters soon?

The Independent Film Channel is releasing it sometime this fall or winter. I know it will definitely play at the theater they acquired — the Waverly in New York City — but I don't know where else it will be shown.

What kind of theater do you like to watch movies in?

I like ones with character. At the Sundance festival, we showed *Lonesome Jim* at the Eccles Theater, which is the largest venue there. And sitting in the audience I could just feel that everyone was with it. I'm a fan of the old classic movie houses, but unfortunately those are really rare now.

Movies like that often find a wider audience on DVD.

That's the way it worked for the other movie I directed, *Trees Lounge*. I don't expect *Lonesome Jim* to have a wide release or a long life in theaters. I hope it does, but with something like this, it's all about word of mouth.

Are you a fan of DVDs?

There's a whole set of John Cassavetes movies on DVD [*Five Films*] that's pretty cool.

You recently acted in Sirius satellite radio's *Theater of the New Ear*. What can you tell me about that?

Carter Burwell, who writes the music for the Coen Brothers movies [*Fargo*, *The Big Lebowski*], was asked to perform his scores in London. But he thought it would be more interesting to write something new instead. So he asked the Coens and Charlie Kaufman [*Adaptation*] if they'd write these radio plays, which we performed for a live audience at St. Ann's Warehouse in Brooklyn.

What was it like?

It was great fun, and the cast was amazing — people like John Goodman, Philip Seymour Hoffman, and Marcia Gay Harden. While I've done radio plays before, this was the first time I'd done *live* radio.

How do you listen to music?

Mainly on an iPod and speakers. But I've gotten back into using a turntable, so I've dug out a lot of my old albums, like Nick Lowe. Back when I was into vinyl, I didn't like jazz like I do now, so I've been buying Thelonious Monk, Miles Davis, and John Coltrane.

I know you've been a firefighter as well as an actor and director. How do those experiences compare?

Acting for me is when you get that adrenaline rush that's comparable to going into a burning building — there's that nervousness, that fear, but you're with people you trust, and it's something you experience together. And when it's over, you feel good. I've never gotten that adrenaline rush from directing, but I definitely felt it doing that live radio piece.

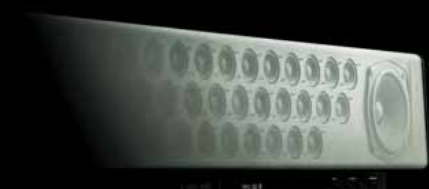
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JAMIE SORCHER TALKS WITH HOLLYWOOD'S MOST FAMOUS CHARACTER ACTOR (*FARGO*, *RESERVOIR DOGS*, *MONSTERS, INC.*, AND 85 OTHER FILMS) ABOUT FIREFIGHTING, VINYL, AND THE REBIRTH OF RADIO DRAMA





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