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DVD-AUDIO/VIDEO PLAYER

McIntosh MVP851

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From the early 1950s through the mid-'60s, almost every doctor, lawyer, and chief audio enthusiast had McIntosh products in their home-entertainment systems. Together with Marantz, McIntosh ruled the American high-end audio market.

Times change. By the mid-'70s, McIntosh was fighting for its share of the high-end audio market, surrounded on all sides by a host of new high-end audio startups, many of them among today's major players, others long gone. But in 1990, Clarion Corporation purchased McIntosh, and with an infusion of cash and talented personnel, the company began to turn around. In the past 13 years, McIntosh has continuously improved and refined their products, to the point where they have rejoined the handful of elite companies whose products define high-end audio and home theater.

The MVP851 DVD-Audio/Video player represents McIntosh's first foray into the world of full-featured DVD-A players. Whether "MVP" stands for "most valuable performer" or merely "McIntosh video player" remains to be seen. Let's take a bite of the latest fruit from McIntosh's orchard.

The Core

The MVP851 can handle DVD-Audio, DVD-Video, DVD-R, Video CD, CD-R/RW, MP3, and standard "Red Book" CDs. Only SACDs won't pass through its circuits. Burr-Brown 24-bit/192kHz D/A converters and built-in Dolby Digital and DTS decoders provide the MVP851 with optimal analog audio.

For CDs, the MVP851 includes a special digital remastering circuit that upsamples 44.1kHz CDs to 88.2kHz. It also redithers them to achieve a longer digital word length to simulate the sound quality of DVD-Audio. With its three different remastering settings, the listener can choose the exact amount of upper-frequency extension preferred.

The MVP851's video circuits include a 12-bit, 54MHz video D/A converter and front-panel-switchable 480i/480p component output. Regardless of what kind of disc you play, the digital servomotor, the fast and quiet platter mechanism, and the dual-focus lens make for quick disc reads. Options for field- or frame-selected still images, five-speed scan, and variable slow-motion speed ensure that freeze-frames and slo-mo pictures will be clear and jitter-free. For playing back less-than-perfect sources, McIntosh includes several noise-reduction circuits. Basic NR can

SPECIFICATIONS

MVP851 DVD-Audio/Video player
Formats: DVD-Audio, DVD-Video, DVD-R, CD, Video CD, CD-R/RW, MP3
Onboard decoders: Dolby Digital, DTS
Analog audio outputs: 1 pair stereo balanced (XLR), 1 pair stereo single-ended (RCA), 1 set single-ended 5.1 (RCA)
Digital audio outputs: 1 coaxial, 1 TosLink
Video outputs: 1 set component (RCA), 1 S-video, 1 composite (RCA)
Frequency responses: DVD: 4Hz–88kHz (192kHz sampling rate on DVD-A); CD: 4Hz–20kHz.
Signal/noise: 115dB
Dynamic range: 103dB
THD: 0.002%
Dimensions: 17.5" × 5.375" × 15" (W×H×D)
Weight: 20 lbs
Price: $3600

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be accessed from the front panel, while the onscreen display menu lets you access more sophisticated filters with different levels of 3D digital noise reduction.

The MVP851's rear panel leaves plenty of room for connecting cables. Unlike many DVD players, the MVP851 has only one set of S-video, composite, and component outputs. If you need to feed multiple systems of the same type from an MVP851, you'll have to do so through an external video distribution amp, an option most professional installers will encourage—such devices can drive long runs of video cable far better than any DVD player.

The remaining output options include one set of 5.1-channel analog audio, one pair of single-ended audio, one pair of XLR balanced audio, optical TosLink digital audio, and coaxial digital audio. Again, some installations may be cramped by so few outputs, but I suspect that reviewers and other devotees of A/B comparisons are the ones who will be most bothered by the lack of redundant outputs. Of course, if the MVP851 is coupled to a McIntosh A/V processor, such as the MX134 pre-pro or MHT200 receiver, its output connections should prove quite sufficient—the MVP851 was designed with just such a mate in mind.

Like the many McIntosh components before it, the MVP851's front panel is a shiny black glass face with green backlit labels—the classic design looks just as elegantly au courant now as it did when first introduced in the late '50s. Symmetrically arranged buttons line the panel's lower edge, and although the front panel lacks a jog/shuttle control, all other critical controls are present. Even the Power switch, usually found on a high-end component's rear panel, sits on the MVP851's front, right next to Standby/On. Besides standard Play, Pause, Stop, FF/Next, Back/Rev, and Open/Close buttons, the MVP851 has Re-Master, MPG DNR, and Progressive/Interlace. Putting the P/I switch on the front, along with a small red LED to indicate which scan mode is engaged, makes life much easier. Being able to tell at a glance whether the player is outputting an interlaced or progressive signal saves a lot of aggravation during setup. McIntosh understands: ergonomics count.

Although it's based on a Panasonic RP91 chassis (except for the platter mechanism and video board), everything on the MVP851 has been replaced with proprietary McIntosh circuits. Instead of Panasonic's stock digital switching power supply, the MVP851 uses a massive R-core power transformer—the same kind of transformer used for power amps. This level of technical overkill reappears throughout the MVP851's interior. With its top-quality parts and elegant circuit designs, the MVP851 represents McIntosh's thinking on what it takes to make the ultimate DVD player.

Many a fine DVD player is tripped up by a bad remote control, but the MVP851's is among the best I've used. Not only does it light up at the push of a button, its topography is logical and easy to use. A centrally located jog/shuttle control divides the remote's real estate in half, the more frequently used

buttons above, the chapter and mode buttons below. The remote had excellent range—rarely did I have to push a button more than once to achieve the desired effect.

Scrapple from the Apple

Using the MVP851's basic setup menus, you can adjust all the standard settings: aspect ratio, black level, audio output level, channel balance, speaker size, rear-channel delay, and still mode. The bass-management crossover is fixed at the THX standard of 80Hz, and listening tests indicated that it functions on the DVD-Audio outputs. Other critical picture adjustments are found in a separate Display menu: sharpness, contrast, brightness, color intensity, tint, gamma, progressive transfer mode, video processing mode, high sharpness, edge sharpness, vertical sharpness, and three types of noise reduction (3D, block, and mosquito).

All of this is similar to the feature set found on current-production Panasonic players. Having reviewed a few Panasonic-based players, *SGHT* Editor Tom Norton assures me that this arrangement can become second nature. Still, first-time users of the MVP851 will spend some time scratching their heads and turning pages in the owner's manual as they negotiate its ins and outs. I wish all controls were in a single menu.

Speaking of the manual, it's far better than many I've seen, but it's not perfect. It doesn't fully detail all of the MVP851's features, including the player's ability to remember an individual disc's settings—a significant attribute. The MVP851 can remember the complete setup parameters for 200 movies. For especially well-mastered movies, such as Sony's Super Bit Map version of *The Fifth Element*, the MVP851 can retain your preferences for Fine picture detail and no noise reduction. When you watch mediocre video transfers such as *Xena: Warrior Princess*, it can invoke maximum noise reduction and a bit of edge enhancement, and it will remember your settings years later. How cool is that?

Taking a Big Bite

The MVP851's video performance didn't disappoint: Its 480p output equaled that of any player I've seen. Only the more expensive Meridian 598 DVD-A player ($5595) and the EAD DVDMaster 8000 Pro DVD-A player ($5900) could match the Mac's performance. But unlike the EAD, whose Adagio video board permits very little in the way of adjustments, the MVP851 lets you adjust the picture for each disc.

On test patterns from the *Video Essentials* and *Avia* test DVDs, the MVP851 had sufficient acuity to resolve even the highest frequencies on test patterns. The challenging Snell & Wilcox moving Zone Plate test looked exceptionally clean, with no sparkles of extraneous color or motion artifacts. Although the MVP851 did exhibit some stair-step jaggies on the fluttering American flag in *VE*'s "Montage of Images," the slow pan across the stadium seats in the same segment had almost no motion anomalies.

The 720p output of Faroudja's NR video processor produces a sharper picture, but the MVP851 equaled it in terms of motion control, color neutrality, and lack of decoding artifacts. When compared to the EAD DVDMaster 8000 Pro, the MVP851 was able to produce a slightly better picture because I could subtly adjust its sharpness, brightness, color saturation, and gamma—not possible with the EAD.

Comparing the MVP851 with the Meridian 598 was difficult. After an hour of going back and forth, I could discern no differences in the picture qualities of these players. Perhaps the MVP851 had a slight edge in motion-artifact control, but the Meridian's picture exhibits a smidgen less noise. Bottom line: Both delivered a 480p image of exceptionally high quality.

The MVP851 performed beautifully as a CD and DVD-Audio player. A/B comparisons with the C.E.C. TL 2 CD transport, EAD DVD-

REVIEW SYSTEM

Sources
Toshiba SD-9200 DVD-A player
C.E.C. TL 2 CD transport
EAD DVDMaster 8000 Pro DVD-A player
Display
SIM2 Sèleco Millennium 800 CRT projector
Preamp-Processors
Lexicon MC-12
Meridian 568.2
Power Amps
Pass X-3
EAD Powermaster 8000
Bryston PowerPac 120 (2)
Speakers
Dunlavy SC-VI
Dunlavy SC-IV (center)
Dunlavy SC-1AV (rears)
Dali MS 4
Dali CS 4 (center)
Dali RS 3 (rears)
Cables
Interconnect: AudioTruth Diamond X-2, Discovery Plus-4, Monster M1000I, Synergistic Research Designer's Reference
Speaker: Synergistic Research Resolution Reference, Monster M-1.2 S
Video: VideoQuest S-1 S-VHS, VSB-1 RCA/coaxial
Misc.
Monster AVS 2000 voltage stabilizer
Monster Power Center 5000 power conditioner
PS Audio Power Plant 300 power conditioner
Camelot Technologies Dragon 5.1 DVD interface box

Master 8000 Pro DVD-A player, and Meridian 598 DVD-A player left me with several pages of listening notes filled with little more than praise. Through their digital outputs, all four players produced soundstages of similar dimensions from CDs as well as Dolby Digital and DTS discs. The C.E.C. had a bit better depth though the Lexicon MC-12 preamp-processor, but this may have been a result of its AES/EBU digital output connection, which the other three lack. Coupled to the Meridian 568.2 A/V processor, the Meridian 598 produced slightly more depth and realism, but the home-team advantage of Meridian's digital upsampling and Meridian High Resolution (MHR) Smart Link connection, which keeps the DVD-A signal in the digital domain from player to processor, could have accounted for its supremacy in this setup. I suspect that if I'd had a McIntosh audio processor, the MVP851 would have reigned supreme. When all things are nearly equal, as they were with these fine players, you can't discount the effects of synergistic component mating.

Through its analog outputs, the MVP851 displayed stellar sound—only the EAD DVD-Master 8000 Pro produced an analog output in the same league. The Meridian 598 was out of the running, because the unit I have has no analog output. The Toshiba SD-9200's analog output sounded mechanical and 2-dimensional compared to the MVP851 and 8000 Pro. Listening to the EAD through the Lexicon MC-12 put it at a slight disadvantage, since its balanced XLR outputs had to be converted to single-ended RCA via adapters. But even with this handicap, the EAD produced a somewhat warmer harmonic balance and richer overall tonality than the MVP851. The McIntosh had a slightly more matter-of-fact harmonic presentation with less euphonic ambience.

My preference between these two players varied depending on the source material. Lush-sounding DVD-A recordings such as Faith Hill's *Cry* (Warner Bros. 48001-9) sounded more timbrally "correct" through the MVP851, but the Grateful Dead's *American Beauty* (Rhino R9 74385) produced a more musically pleasing, harmonically richer result through the EAD. Through the Meridian 568.2 A/V processor, both players' analog outputs paled in comparison to the Meridian 598 DVD player's Smart Link connection. The 598's superiority was not subtle. Through the Meridian combo, DVD-As sounded immediate, detailed, dimensionally palpable, and much more emotionally involving. At the end of that listening session, I prayed to the audio gods that I might live long enough to see a time when all DVD-Audio players come with digital connections.

As American as Apple Pie

I know it's a guy thing, but I can't help comparing fine home-theater components to expensive automobiles. Meridian's 598 DVD player reminds me of an Aston Martin V-12 Vanquish, EAD's DVDMaster 8000 Pro feels like a Shelby AC Cobra, and the McIntosh MVP851 evokes images of a Cadillac El Dorado. Like the Cadillac, the McIntosh defines classic American style with its timeless looks, ergonomic elegance, and solid feel. Also like the Cadillac, the MVP851 offers excellent performance for less than the other choices. If you have a hankering for a first-class DVD-Video/Audio player that performs effortlessly, the McIntosh MVP851 could become the apple of your home-theater eye.

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