

ALISTAIR MCGHEE is a sucker for the promise of 'more and more', so HHB's universal disc player provides a real treat for him.

I have five silver disc players in my life. At work an Alesis Masterlink, a Fostex CR-500, and a Denon DN-C640. At home a Pioneer 656A and a Sony XE597. Every one of these I bought because it does a little more. So I should be a sucker for HHB's UDP-89, which promises more, more, and more. Hence 'U' for universal. But exactly how more is more? Well the 89 will play CD, CD-R, CD-RW, CD-Video, SACD, DVD-Video, DVD-Audio, DVD-R, DVD+R, DVD-RW, DVD+RW, and compressed audio (compressed in a really, really popular format) and MPEG4 .avi video files can also be taken for a spin.

spdif on optical and coax, and 5.1 and stereo analogue balanced on a DB25 connector. Something for everyone really. Control options include a nice broadcast friendly front panel, a standard remote, and also RS232 and parallel options. And as it is a DVD player, the video output carries are useful extra info if you have a spare screen or even just a spare input on a monitor.

Video output is equally well catered for with composite, component, and HDMI options available. I enjoyed a great comedy moment when I couldn't see anything on a video output as the machine had been set to an



HHB UDP 89

Professional Universal DVD/CD Player

Before we ring the bells and blow the whistles it's worth thinking about the *raison d'être* of the UDP. The question of being a player, in a computer world where all our players are recorders and now we're kind of used to all-encompassing functionality. For instance, the Fostex is a recorder that also plays – those ten hot start keys and a big screen (the Fostex is a 2U machine) tempt some engineers to despise the more orthodox Denon. But the HHB has the high definition audio formats and DVD playback, so it sets itself apart from mere CD players. I want to play all high definition audio formats – compressed playback is a bonus but not a 'more' I really care about. But SACD and DVD-A are big pluses for me, even if neither has set the world alight nor likely will. Time to ring a bell.

Step one – take down from the shelf *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* – the pernicky SACD version – and slap it in the tray. The UDP is a 1U machine and hurray for that, but the tray feels a touch flimsy for being so slim I suppose. Step two – select track sixteen *I am a Man of Constant Sorrow*. Step three – strut round room mimicking the mighty Dan Tyminski, and marvel at a band that resists all temptation to increase the tempo by as much as a microsecond. It feels so good you can almost forgive country music its love affair with the stetson. SACD playback sounds good. Pop the CD – damn can't grab the disc across the tray – finger it out. Drop in the first CD from the pile, Joan Armatrading. The first thing I notice is an iron grip on the bottom end, the bass more tuneful than I've heard in a while. Probably just because I'm listening hard to a new bit of kit, but it's an impression that stayed with me over extended listening. Oh yes, and snares tighter than small business budgets in credit crunch Blighty. I think it's a dynamic thing. I won't gush but I really enjoyed listening to music on the UDP. And joy of joy – the headphone amp goes loud, say good bye to the phone, the doorbell, and jet engines overhead – but why is the 'o' at four o'clock?

Having spent my cash on SACD discs and players I never paid much attention to DVD-Audio, I thought one extra format enough. So how to test the DVD-A playback? Sequoia to the rescue, as version 10 of the omni-competent DAW can author and burn a simple DVD audio disc. I quickly ran up a compilation disc and the UDP played it without batting an eyelid. And then I thought, have I backed the wrong horse? I know they've both fallen, and the vet has put DVD-A out of its misery, but actually 4.7Gb space for uncompressed high resolution audio that you can burn on your very own PC is a jolly nice idea.

The UDP offers plenty of connectivity, stereo phonos, 5.1 on phonos, balanced stereo analogue on XLR, AES on XLR,

upscale resolution and I didn't have the manual to hand. Actually it was a reminder of how important having a pdf on the website is. Well done on that one HHB. Alongside DVD and Video CD playback, the 89 will also play MPEG type 1, 2, and 4 video embedded in mpg and .avi files. And this includes DivX and XviD files as long as they are DRM free.

The machine has NTSC support alongside PAL and that includes upscaling. I did wonder about a ubiquitous SCART socket, but to be honest there's nowhere to put one. But you can switch the component BNCs to RGB and with the right lead SCART away. As a sound man I'm not the best person to judge video quality, but the pictures look very nice to me. The UDP can upscale to 1080i and on my 16:9 Benq Leonardo and Cate appear pretty damn fine in *The Aviator*.

The HHB has a full surround implementation (Dolby Digital and DTS) including bass management, a pink noise generator, and individual volume and delay settings, all of which should ensure that the first 20 minutes of *Saving Private Ryan* will scare the crap out of the cat. One nice feature is the master volume control on the remote. This allows you to set the output gain directly on the player, so you could at a push connect the 89 directly to your power amps saving yourself a preamp and a heap of wires.

So is this the machine for you? Well if I can just nigger – the skip track function could be quicker, I don't like eject buttons underneath the tray, and CD track name info on the display is a must for radio. There's probably a more serious issue with the nature of 'Universal', the bumblebee in the ointment is Blu-ray. As a late adopter in video, I don't care but you might.

Conclusion

But I'm not going to get hung up on the ultimates and universals. This is a machine with high def audio formats, superb connectivity, excellent pro control options and features, and superb output quality. And it's not expensive. So if you need a professional player, 89 might just be your lucky number. Take it away Soggy Bottom Boys... *I am a man of constant sorrow...* 🎸

INFORMATION

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THE REVIEWER

ALISTAIR MCGHEE began audio life in Hi-Fi before joining the BBC as an audio engineer. After ten years in radio and TV, he moved to production. When BBC Choice started, he pioneered personal digital production in television. Alistair is now Assistant Editor, BBC Radio Wales, but is allowed out occasionally.