

Long live VHS!

Panasonic's DVD/HDD/VCR is the convergence king, says **Martin Pipe**



Do you still have VHS tapes that you want to play – or, better still, transfer to DVD? Then Panasonic's smart-looking DMR-EX98V could be for you. As a DVD recorder-cum-VCR-cum-hard disk drive, it's certainly an interesting proposal.

The caveat to this £500 unit is that the integrated VCR is a budget model; it may have hi-fi sound and SP/LP/EP speeds, but the lack of 'true' S-VHS compatibility (it plays such tapes in slightly better than VHS quality) will disappoint some. In other respects, though, impressions of the EX98 are more positive. On offer are DivX/MP3/JPEG playback (via USB or CD/DVD-ROM); a single digital tuner; 720p/1080i/1080p upscaling via HDMI; GuidePlus; i.Link for digital camcorder dubs; an SD slot for video/JPEG playback; and multiformat DVD recording.

The onboard 250GB HDD delivers much potential, including between 55 and 441 hours of recording (depending on which of the four recording modes is used); the ability to act as a music jukebox (the EX98 will 'rip' CDs losslessly); and the PVR-like functionality of Freeview Playback. Unfortunately, the trick of pausing live TV is spoilt by a pointless onscreen graphic, and the inability to permanently 'save' recordings currently in the buffer. Freeview Playback features include Guide-Link, series-recording, schedule-clash protection and 'split programme'.

Installation is friendly, the EX98 automatically finding and storing digital channels (there's no analogue

tuner) when it's first plugged in. I cannot fault the layout of the menus, which include setup functions like HDMI and analogue video-output modes, recording, and DVD playback preferences.

All formats – DVD+RW/-RW/RAM and +R/-R – are catered for. Dual-layer recording is also supported, although you have to record first to the HDD. All but the lowest-quality mode record at DVD's full 720 x 576 resolution, for optimal capture of detail. If you choose to record to the HDD, a sensible range of editing and dubbing facilities are at your disposal – they're particularly welcome when dubbing VHS.

Recordings can be 'trimmed' or split, then copied losslessly to DVD at high-speed, or via a lower-quality mode in real-time.

Crunch time

The Freeview tuner is capable of good pictures, although the EX98's use of adaptive noise reduction is responsible for a slight softening.

Recordings from Freeview and an external Sky box are excellent, especially in the top SP/XP modes. The LP mode retains source detail, but movement is spoilt by obvious blocking. VHS dubs (use SP or better) are fairly lacklustre, though. DVD playback is excellent, comparing favourably with many dedicated players; HDMI upscaling is also strong, and it easily passes the HQV jaggies test. Overall, this Panasonic is a great machine that's let down only by a mediocre VCR. I want S-VHS compatibility, dammit! ●

Deck hand:

It may contain a legacy VCR, but Panasonic's DMR-EX98V boasts contemporary styling

→ Specifications

DVD Recorder: yes it writes to DVD-R/RW, DVD+R/RW and DVD-RAM
Dual-layer recording: yes
Hard Drive: yes 250GB
DVB tuner: yes but no analogue tuner
Upscaling: yes to 1080p
Recording modes: four, plus FR
HDMI socket: yes with CEC support
Dimensions: 430(w) x 84(h) x 341(d)mm
Weight: 6.3kg
Also Features: CD jukebox; 'one-touch copying' between VHS/HDD/DVD; USB; memory card slot

→ Tech Labs

DVD playback

Audio jitter: 184.5ps 1 2 3 4 5
 Video jitter: 6ns 1 2 3 4 5
 Video S/N ratio (interlaced component Y): -68.1dB 1 2 3 4 5
 Chroma AM: -71.3dB 1 2 3 4 5
 Chroma PM: -70.3dB 1 2 3 4 5
 Chroma Crosstalk: -48.9dB 1 2 3 4 5
 Response @ 5.8MHz (component interlaced): -0.09dB 1 2 3 4 5

HQV Benchmark Jaggies Test: PASS
 HQV Benchmark Text Crawl Test: FAIL



HCC VERDICT

Panasonic DMR-EX98V
 £500 Approx

Price check: www.techradar.com/417716

Highs: Excellent AV performance; sensibly-featured digital recorder

Lows: VHS-only VCR, no analogue tuner; no infra-red control over STB

Performance: 1 2 3 4 5

Design: 1 2 3 4 5

Features: 1 2 3 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 4 5