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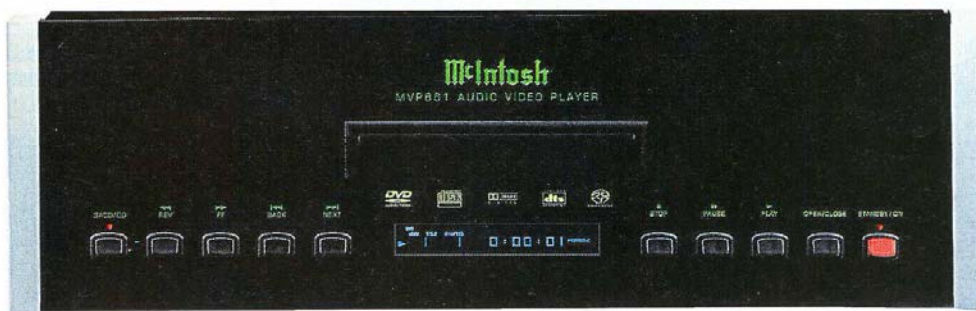
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Audio Files

By Ken Micallef



Lush Reproduction: McIntosh MVP 861 Universal Disc Player Plays Telarc SACDs

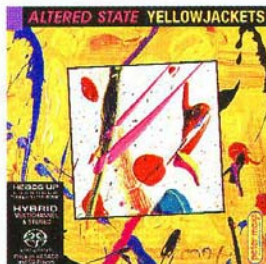
For 55 years McIntosh Labs of Binghamton, N.Y., has produced some of high-end audio's most beloved products. McIntosh's trademark lush sound is matched by its sleek design, reflected in its ubiquitous backlit black glass front panels and a boxy look. The MVP 861 is McIntosh's first attempt at a universal high-resolution player, and it will play everything: CD, DVD, DVD-A, SACDs, CD-R, and CD-RWs with CD audio or MP3 files.

Built to surpass McIntosh's previous MVP 851 DVD player, the \$4,100 MVP 861 includes advancements like a newly designed transport mechanism that spins CDs four times faster than most players. The transport reads the data on the disc, and then stores that data in buffer memory where it performs error correction. The MVP 861 uses three pairs of PCM/DSD Burr Brown DACs (digital to analog converters), which can decode DSD data without any conversion to PCM, a process that many consider to be inferior and sound degrading. The MVP's output options include both coaxial and TosLink digital connectors, single-ended RCA and balanced XLR stereo outputs.

Telarc shares McIntosh's reputation for excellent sonics, releasing SACDs since 1999. Telarc hybrid SACDs on review this month are Hiromi's *Brain* (63600), Yellowjackets' *Altered State* (Heads Up 69097) and John Pizzarelli's *Knowing You* (63615).

The MVP 861 did what all exceptional audio components should do: define the unique recording space of every disc. Two very different CDs—the soundtrack to *Sideways* and *Visions Of An Inner Mounting Apocalypse*—sounded totally different through the MVP. The *Sideways* music has a small-ensemble swing appeal that suits the film's California wine country setting, but it

also has a tad too much richness in the bass and an equally heavy dollop of ambience on Will Kennedy's drums. The MVP's warmth and smoothness didn't gloss over or highlight *Sideways'* honeyed character, but presented it truthfully. The Mahavishnu tribute disc *Visions* is a boiling, sonically hot recording. The MVP revealed the almost laptop configured sound of *Visions*.



The MVP 861 made every CD and SACD sound good, a real plus in a world of a digital mastering that sometimes results in ear-piercing, tipped up fidelity. The MVP 861's willingness to get along didn't translate into favoritism when it came to SACD playback. The MVP revealed differences with each SACD, while casting them all in a decidedly friendly light.

Pizzarelli's *Knowing You* is light and breezy, the singer/guitarist crooning in an intimate soundstage. The sound of the disc was intimate, if a bit too plump and boomy in the low bass. Both the McIntosh and the Pizzarelli disc are inherently dark sounding, casting a warm, wooly presentation when combined.

Things perked up considerably on the Yellowjackets' *Altered State*, with its greater focus on midrange frequencies enabling greater detail from cymbals, piano, saxophone and upper bass.

But the hands-down winner of the Telarc round up is Hiromi's *Brain*, sonically well-balanced from treble to bass, so even when the keyboardist is whizzing an ear-frying synth line, Anthony Jackson's bass is clear and precise, no matter how low he goes. The MVP 861's dark character never detracted from *Brain's* intensity and impact, but only focused its lower frequencies. For lovers of low bass frequencies, the MVP 861 is a gift. **DB**

» Ordering Info: mcintoshlabs.com; telarc.com