

Move Over, VCR

The Rockies may crumble, Gibraltar may tumble. DVD seems here to stay. Is it time to buy a player and buy into the revolution? Answers to videophiles' consuming questions. **by Michael Giltz**



OKAY, SO YOU DON'T NEED every new gizmo as soon as it hits the stores. \$10,000 for an HDTV set? No thanks. But how about DVD? The digital video disc, now 18 months on the market, is already one of the world's more successful new recorded formats—more than 500,000 players sold, compared with 230,000 VCRs and 243,000 CD players in the first two years after their introductions. And the discs are everywhere—about 2,000 titles will have been issued by year's end, available, in varying degrees, at Blockbuster Video, Tower, chains like Super Kmart, specialty stores, and online services. A lot more stores will soon be offering DVD for rent, too (among them, Tower branches and, in many cities, Blockbusters), something the all-but-dead laserdisc could never claim. So is it time to pony up? Let's review all the factors.

■ **HOW'S THE PICTURE?** Stunning. It's even better than laserdisc, with movies like *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* (Fox Lorber) and *The Wizard of Oz* (MGM) so beautiful you'll want to freeze some scenes and leave them on your TV the way others hang works of art on their walls. Movies with lots of special effects or ominously murky settings—*Blade Runner* (Warner) and the CGI-fest *Dark City* (New Line) fit both descriptions—live up to their reputations on DVD.

■ **HOW'S THE SOUND?** Much better than on VHS. Though it still has some catching up to do with laserdisc (that cumbersome format's greatest strength), it's getting better all the time. If you want to wow your friends, *A Hard Day's Night* (MPI) and *Starship Troopers* (Columbia TriStar) will have them



OPTIONS GALORE Menus (like *Troopers'*, top) that let you skip to favorite scenes, sharper images (*Oz's* vibrant greens are an attention grabber), and subtitles on demand (as in *Goldfinger*) make DVD a tempting buy

singing along and spraying for bugs.

■ ARE PLAYER FEATURES THAT MUCH BETTER THAN A VCR'S? Yes. With chapter searches, you can jump to any scene in a movie within seconds. James Bond flicks like *Goldfinger* (MGM) are worth watching over and over, but who can blame you for jumping to a jaw-dropping action sequence when it's so easy to access?

■ ARE THE DISC EXTRAS WORTH THE EXTRA COIN? They certainly can be. Documentaries that take you behind the

scenes, trailers, outtakes, production stills, alternate-language and subtitling options, audio tracks with the director and cast talking about the making of the movie—VHS can't accommodate all these bonuses, and special-edition laserdiscs can cost \$100 or more. *L.A. Confidential* (Warner) and *Boogie Nights* (New Line) are outstanding examples, while hearing Jack Nicholson hold court on the commentary track of *As Good as It Gets* (Columbia TriStar) is a rare treat.

■ DOES DVD MAKE ANY DIFFERENCE FOR OLDER MOVIES? Absolutely. With DVDs, you're often seeing the movie in its best shape since it first came out, such as with *The Philadelphia Story* (MGM). And letterboxing—a DVD mainstay—is just as important as a good print. Letterboxing lets you see a movie the way it was shown in the theaters. For *Born on the Fourth of July* (Universal), *2001: A Space Odyssey* (MGM), and *Ran* (Fox Lorber) it's the only way to go. But don't fret: Many recent movies are offered in both wide-screen and cropped formats on the same disc, so you don't have to choose.

■ WILL DVDS LAST? That is, are the discs durable?

Don't use them as Frisbees or teething rings for the kids, but if they want to watch *The Little Princess* (Lumivision) for the hundredth time, don't sweat it.

■ WILL DVD PLAYERS REPLACE THE VCR? Not any time soon. Despite speculation that recordable DVDs will be on shelves for the '99 holiday season, they're still probably years away. Keep your VCR, just as you kept the audiotape deck to

(Continued on page 112)



REMASTERY Kate Hepburn's *Story* on DVD

make copies for the car or party tapes. But you can get rid of that old CD player that skips: DVD players play all CDs.

■ **SHOULD I WAIT FOR DVD-AUDIO TO DEBUT?** No. Technical specifications for audio-only DVDs, which promise even better sound than current music CDs, have yet to be hashed out, and the discs, along with compatible audio-video players, probably won't come out until late next year. So unless you're nuts for highly detailed sound, don't wait.

■ **WILL PLAYER PRICES KEEP DROPPING?** Probably, but you can already buy DVD players for as low as \$300, and there should be more at that price by Christmas. That's a bargain compared with the \$750 to \$1,000 they started at.

■ **WHAT ABOUT DISC PRICES?** Most new DVDs cost \$20 to \$30; Warner Home Video is readying a budget line as low as \$9.95. That means the pressure on the major studios is to keep prices down. (By and large, renting a DVD costs the same as a tape rental.) What's more, every DVD is priced to sell—even when the same title on tape is offered “for rental only” (that is, priced at about \$100). That means even if you're the only person on your block dying to own *The Postman*, you won't have to wait six months to a year to afford it.

■ **IS SOMETHING GOING TO REPLACE DVD?** The next step after that is expected to be a super-DVD with a picture as detailed as HDTV (thanks to new laser technology), but that seems at least five years away. And those players will definitely be backward compatible, so you'll still be able to play all your current DVDs and CDs. Those bulky tape cassettes you have now? I predict whole cities in Arizona built from recycled VHS bricks. ■