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Shoot Review: nNovia QC Deck

Nov 1, 2006 12:00 PM, Reviewer: Tom Patrick McAuliffe
Professional DVR features at a competitive price.

At NAB this year, nNovia introduced its second-generation product, the new QC Deck, a small digital video recorder (DVR) that uses removable hard drives. nNovia has developed a proprietary technology and chip called the SSP-100 (a patent is pending), which the company claims is the industry's first standalone, multi-stream processor for managing realtime, high-bandwidth signals in and out of digital mass storage devices. I was intrigued.

The nNovia QC Deck is highly portable: It's about the size of an SLR camera.

The QC Deck recorder, about the size of an SLR camera, is compatible with HDV, NTSC, and PAL; features Auto Play and Auto Record; and supports multiple digital media file types such as AVI and QuickTime. It is also Windows- and Mac-compatible, with an IEEE 1394 (FireWire) port for I/O.

As shooters record directly to a removable MediaPac hard drive, they save the time of digitizing footage for the editing process. The QC Deck is available in two configurations. The deck alone with a breakout cable and AC adapter is $1,899. The QCD100K1 bundle, which I tested, includes the QC Deck, breakout cable, a 100GB MediaPac, a shoulder/belt-mounted bag, a NiCad battery, and an external IEEE 1394 cable adapter for the MediaPac HD recording media. Capacities range from 40GB to 120GB, so these small hard disk drives (HDD) are able to store hours of video. For example, 100GB of MediaPac storage records up to 7.5 hours of DV. For HDV, because it's high defintion and the clip file size is larger, you'd get roughly half that. (The company indicates that a 300GB version of the MediaPac is coming by the end of the year, and a solid-state version of the QC Deck with the hard drive permanently installed will be available in the near future.)

The ability to capture multiple video formats from HDV to DV to lowly composite and choose to record either Windows AVI or Mac MOV video files is a strong selling point for me, as I use both platforms. Add one to the DVR's score for cross-computability.

Does the QC Deck perform just like any other DVR in the field and like a traditional VTR in the edit bay? I had just the project to test this.

Remote-controlled aircraft and helicopters have become more sophisticated and more popular in recent years — it's one of the fastest-growing hobbies in America. Every year the Aloha Fly-In, an invitational race and show in Hawaii, draws hundreds of enthusiasts from around the world for a two-day charity event. For my shooting purposes, time was of the essence: Many participants would be departing the area within a short time and wanting to take a commemorative VHS or DVD with them.

It was a sunny day, and as I looked up at the hot Hawaiian sun, I became thankful that I would be

using a hard-disk-based recorder. Add the heat to the moist ocean air, and it's a recipe for tape dropouts and other problems. The QC Deck should keep its cool (and did). I slung over my shoulder the deck and its small battery system in its rugged canvas case.

I hooked up my Sony DV camera directly to the QC Deck via FireWire (IEEE 1394) and was basically ready to go. I had up to 99 BINs for clips, so I split the BINs up into various events or kinds of aircraft. One for stunts, one for the races, one for the static displays, one for helicopters, one for props, one for jets, etc. I would find in postproduction that this is a very useful organizational tool — as was the fact that each piece of footage gets a distinct clip number that includes its BIN number. No more pen and pad!

The action was moving fast and furious, and time was a factor. Though it took a few seconds for the unit to power up and kick into record, I did not find it objectionable. During the event I also recorded footage with the composite and S-Video (Y/C) outs from my three-chip camera via the included breakout cable, otherwise known as an octopus cable for all its wires leading in and out of the deck. However, the cables are not nearly long enough, nor well labeled. But being able to record all sorts of formats and then decide later whether you want to make them ready for PC or Mac really makes everything easy.

I found the QC Deck's LCD display a little too small and a little too dark, making it hard to read in sunlight and even under shade. But the Tally LED, which indicates when the unit is recording, is a godsend. It indicates red when recording, green when playing back, and it blinks when there's no MediaPac inserted. Useful.

And I can't say enough about these little MediaPac wonders. The small 2.5in. removable hard drive (manufactured by Audavi) is the same one used with the Hitachi Z-DR1 (see my review at **digitalcontentproducer.com/cameras/revfeat/video_hitachi_zdr**). You get about three hours of DV or HDV footage on a 40GB and 7.5 hours on a 100GB MediaPac. It also has a separate area of the hard drive that is only accessible upon computer connection. With that storage I could take all of the JPEG stills of the pilots, the CG titles, and the digital maps of the airfield and the racecourse, and archive them along with the footage either on the MediaPac itself or burn them onto a data DVD.

The QC Deck comes with both an AC adapter and a battery. The small NiCad battery system lasted only about four hours (three hours and 43 minutes to be exact). It's a no-frills affair with just the battery canisters wrapped in hard black plastic, and no case. Once I ran out of power I was in freefall and would have to wait until it recharged. (Additional battery units are available, and one would be wise to have a backup on hand to avoid delays.) Battery recharge rates vary wildly based on things like battery charge memory, AC current, heat, etc.

For such an elegant and state-of-the-art product, its portable battery system seemed clunky. I'd encourage nNovia to consider working with a major battery manufacturer to improve its portable power system. A small, quickly rechargeable power source that attaches to the bottom via a small strap or Velcro might be ideal. I tried the QC Deck with the new Elipz battery system from Anton Bauer, and it worked great (though the rig became a bit heavy).

As the sun set and the RC pilots put their little planes in their tiny hangars for the night (seriously), I was confident I had the footage in the can — without the dropouts that even DV tapes can sometimes produce. The instant playback was proof that I had it made. It's a new after-the-shoot feeling, and I like it. On the single 100GB MediaPac, I was able to get a whole day's worth of DV, with other formats varying in time (the grand total was about five hours). Headed for the all-night edit session with my six-pack of Jolt Cola, I wondered how the QC Deck would interface with my NLE and if it would really save me time.

In the edit suite, I was not disappointed. After testing on both a PC and a Mac, I can report that the nNovia QC Deck not only loves shooting in the field, it's right at home in editing. I could use the whole QC Deck as a DVR, and it operated like any other drive, only a lot smaller. Or I just flip up the front of the deck, pop out the MediaPac, and use its FireWire cable to connect it directly to

the computer, leaving the QC Deck free to go back out and capture more footage with a different MediaPac.

Editing was a matter of merely dragging the clips as files directly to the NLE software timeline. Quick, simple, and productive. With some preplanning and judicious shot selection before actually shooting, and by skipping the usual digitization process, I was able to save tons of time.

Even with the morning deadline on the horizon, the edit was going smoothly. nNovia made the QC deck easy to use and intuitive, but in case you get stuck, the manual is above average. However, it's just a bunch of 8"×11" papers stapled together. I'd encourage nNovia to consider providing at least a hard cover, or even a binder, and adding some more information on the MediaPacs themselves or including that documentation from Audavi. If your edit suite/office is at all like mine, docs like this would last about a week!

With the tight deadline in mind, it was lucky I had edited in the nNovia while shooting and added a few cross-dissolves and other effects. After minimal editing and adding a few titles and some rockin' music, I stumbled out of the edit suite, grabbed a few hours of sleep, went to an early-morning breakfast, and was at the DVD duplicator with MediaPac in hand when they opened at 9 a.m. Later that day, I delivered the finished DVDs to the awards picnic. I was the hero of the 2006 Aloha Fly-In, getting kudos, food, and a lei for my efforts.

With this product, nNovia has done an “Inverted Cuban Eight” in radio-controlled aircraft jargon, a difficult maneuver that indicates the best of the best. The QC Deck's highly portable size, its removable MediaPacs in various capacities, and cross-platform/format compatibility add up to a high score for me. I experienced virtually no turbulence using it. Any video creator looking to save time on digitization with a reliable recording, playback, and storage medium that's HDV-ready should look no further.

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bottomline

Company: nNovia
San Jose, Calif.; (408) 436-1486
www.nnovia.com

Product: QC Deck

Assets: Small size, includes travel pack and highly portable battery, Windows or Mac OS X compatible, removable media, time-lapse recording, and NTSC or PAL.

Caveats: Breakout cables are not long enough, nor well labeled.

Demographic: Any video creator looking to save time on digitization with a reliable recording, playback, and storage medium that's HDV-ready.

PRICE: $1,899 MSRP ($2,100 AS TESTED)

Tom Patrick McAuliffe is a journalist, musician, and digital media creator who owns Reel Communications in Hololulu. See his other reviews atwww.digitalcontentproducer.com.

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