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REVIEWS Minolta Digital Camera, Scanners from Canon, Epson and Hewlett-Packard, Vidikron Vision Model 40 Projector, NHT Speakers, Palm Tungsten PDA, LG VX6000 Camera Phone

BY GRANT CLAUSER



VIDIKRON VISION MODEL 40 DLP PROJECTOR

A NEW VISION FOR HOME THEATER



Home theater aficionados may be familiar with the Vidikron company, but not the product profiled here. With projectors like the Vision One, Vidikron, formerly an Italian company, earned praise even from director Martin Scorsese. Yet the company fell on sour times, and the name seemed doomed to disappear. Well, about a year ago, the revered brand was acquired by one of its fiercest rivals, Runco International. This is the first Runco-produced product to bear the Vidikron brand.

While the old Vidikron was known for large, celestially priced three-gun CRT projectors, the new Vidikron is firmly in the digital age — its line of new products is strictly DLP. This particular Vidikron, while still a high-priced piece of gear, is targeted at mid-level home theater consumers (in a category where mid-level means \$9,000).

The Vision Model 40 is basic-looking white box with the usual controls located on both the rear and top (for easy reach when ceiling-mounted upside-down). Its specs rate it for screens up to 96 inches. The inputs are pretty comprehensive, too. There are single composite and S-Video inputs, a set of RGB-HV (red, blue, green-vertical, horizontal) inputs with sturdy BNC-style connectors that also double as high definition or progressive

component inputs, a single DVI input with HDCP (high definition copy protection) and a second set of interlaced-only component inputs with RCA connectors. Progressive scan DVD players and high definition tuners get connected through the BNC or DVI inputs.

With DLP home theater projectors from dozens of manufacturers now in the market, many listing nearly the same basic specifications, it's difficult to tell them apart on paper. However, Runco has a history of putting its own special spin on technology to get the most performance out. On this Vidikron, the company added a few tweaks, including what it calls "Cat's Eye" optics to enhance black levels, and a nine-point white balance system to aid grayscale tracking. Like most projectors on the market, it has a built-in video processor with 3:2 pull-down to fix errors commonly found on film-based material. There are also two lens options: the standard short-throw lens, which I reviewed, and a long-throw lens for large rooms.

Setup is one area in which the new Vidikron is miles ahead of the old. In the Vision One days, CRT projectors required lengthy setup times in which installers labored over mechanical convergence and focus, and made tedious calibrations. Today's DLP projectors are nearly plug-and-play. An experienced installer will have it sparkling in less than

Vidikron Vision Model 40 Projector

\$8,999

1,280x720 resolution (16:9)

Texas Instruments HD-2 DLP chip

950 ANSI lumens

1,600:1 contrast ratio

www.vidikron.com

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an hour. I connected the projector to a Toshiba DVD player, JVC high definition D-VHS player, Zenith HDTV receiver and a standard DirecTV receiver, and aimed it at a Stewart Grayhawk screen. Aiming and focusing were simple, though this unit lacked some niceties common to higher-priced projectors, like an optical shift to raise or lower the image. Additionally, keystone correction is available only for vertical, not horizontal adjustments. The zoom range also seems limited compared to other products, particularly the Marantz VP12S1 in my system. Focus and zoom are performed by dialing the lens.

While you don't need to spend all day calibrating the Model 40, I did spend some time hooking it up to a Sencore CP5000 color analyzer and running some test patterns. True to the company's claims, the Model 40 tracks grayscale very well. Achieving the desired 65K color temperature took no time at all. Black levels on test patterns were impressive. There are three picture memories for each input, all easy to set and easy to recall when switching sources.

The Model 40 uses the latest version of Texas Instruments' DLP chip, the HD-2, known as the Mustang by people in the know. The benefit of the Mustang chip over the first HD DLP is improved blacks and contrast from an increase in the micro mirror's tilt angle (DLP projectors use a panel of micro mirrors to reflect light through the lens onto the screen). When I compared the picture of a *Men in Black II* DVD on my Marantz to its appearance on the Vidikron, the Vidikron clearly out-did the Marantz in deep blacks. (For the record, Marantz now also offers a projector with the Mustang chip.) The black suits of the "Men" looked black, not gray, and the shiny black leather of Selena the underwear alien looked like an oil slick. To test the unit's deinterlacing, I ran the DVD player in interlaced mode though the RCA component inputs. Vidikron's processing did an outstanding job, giving a smooth, film-like image.

When I switched to high-definition material, the Vidikron easily rose to the challenge. I watched a few programs I'd pre-recorded with a Zenith HD hard drive recorder. The daytime soap *The Young and the Restless*, while shallow on content, looked life-like on screen. The creatively filmed *CSI: Miami*, with its sun-scorched tints, came off more film-like, as the makers intended. Close-up shots of crime victims couldn't get much more gruesome if they were actually sprawled on my floor. Switching to the high definition D-Theater version of the movie *U-571*, the Vidikron once again showed detail, colors and blacks, all with grace.

On standard definition TV, supplied through my DirecTV receiver, the projector's internal processor did about as well as others — not

dramatic, but not bad. Low-quality signals showed more noise than better signals, but it was all watchable on the large screen, and HBO really looked great. One thing that came up with the DirecTV programs connected via S-Video, but not the other signals, was the occasional appearance of a rainbow splash of color in the periphery of my vision. This comes from the color wheel used to split the lamp's light into red, blue and green, and is present on all DLP projectors. I never saw it during high definition or DVD viewing.

So far, the Model 40 seems every bit as good as any number of higher-priced projectors, including those by Runco. So what's the catch? Not much. What sets the Vidikron 40 apart from the \$12,000 to \$15,000 projectors is noise. The Vidikron runs louder than my Marantz; I found I needed to keep the program volume up a bit more than usual, particularly during very quiet scenes (like when the submariners on *U-571* try to keep deathly quiet to avoid detection). Its primary cooling is done by a fan, which isn't as well-insulated.

What can you do about the noise? Most installers can surround the projector in a box, as long as you leave enough room for air circulation. Depending on your installation and required throw distance, you may be able to mount it far behind you. I had it just a few feet in front of me — much too close, in fact. My standard projector is about the same distance, but suspended from the ceiling.

The Model 40 occupies a space in the market that is rife with competition these days, much of it from data projection companies rather than those in the home theater world. This product is clearly all home theater, in its operation and picture quality, and one of the best in its class. Whether it is the right one for you depends first, of course, on your budget, but also on how you plan to use it. Its ease of use makes it a good fit for the do-it-yourself home theater fan, but most people will have a pro do the work as part of a whole system.

Until recently, Vidikron was old school. Vidikron now is very new school, and it takes another step toward bringing big home theaters to a wider, albeit still well-banked, group of buyers. Its styling prevents it from calling undue attention to itself when not in use, but when fired up, you won't be able to peel your eyes from its picture. ■■

