Reel Connections - Issue #16

S-VHS: Better, But Mostly Forgotten

A Weekly Sunday Newsletter from Stilson Video Services

Two of our Super VHS ET transfer decks ready for duty

Over the past 20 years of transferring VHS tapes for thousands of customers, I only recall a few who specifically pointed out that their tapes were S-VHS. They were excited, knowing that the quality of their tapes was better than regular VHS.

S-VHS is hardly ever mentioned anymore and is rarely understood. So I want to explain what it is, how it came to be, and why it matters.

VHS was introduced by JVC in 1976. It was primarily designed for home use and eventually beat out Betamax as the dominant home video format. From a quality standpoint, VHS wasn't that great, with only about 240 horizontal lines of resolution. Even so, at the time the quality wasn't an issue for most people.

As time went on and broadcast quality improved, there was a push for something better than standard VHS. In 1987, JVC introduced the S-VHS format, where the "S" stood for Super.

The biggest improvement was resolution, which increased from roughly 240 lines to about 400 lines. This resulted in a picture that was noticeably sharper, with better detail and less video noise.

So with all that being said, why don't most people know what it is? Despite being clearly better, S-VHS never replaced VHS for several reasons:

- VHS was already everywhere and had saturated the market
- S-VHS recorders and players were more expensive
- Most consumers remained satisfied with regular VHS
- New digital formats were on the horizon

Even so, there are still plenty of S-VHS tapes that need to be transferred. But the vast majority of people don't know they have them. This is mostly because the two formats share the same cassette design, with only very subtle differences.

Those of us who are committed to transferring family memories the best way possible need to pay attention to this. That's why our transfer decks are S-VHS compatible, and we utilize S-Video cables instead of the far more common RCA connectors.

The RCA composite cables—usually identified by their yellow, red, and white connectors—combine the brightness/detail and color information into a single signal. An S-Video cable separates them into two signals, which results in a sharper, cleaner picture with better color representation.

Wouldn't you want this for something like your wedding video? Many companies use regular VHS decks for transfers. They will play S-VHS tapes, but they can't take advantage of the format's higher resolution and quality.

I assume the reason is simple: professional S-VHS decks often cost ten times more than standard VHS decks.

Because S-VHS was marketed as a higher-end format, the machines themselves were often built better than typical VHS players. Many included improved electronics and sturdier tape transports, resulting in cleaner playback and longer equipment life.

The sad fact is that the customer will never know they're being short-changed.

Granted, not many people recorded their home movies in S-VHS. My estimate is only around 1–2%. The format was more widely used by prosumer videographers or small production houses for things like weddings, educational applications, and industrial

videos. It wasn't quite broadcast quality, but it was close enough to open the door for a whole generation of video creators.

This is why it matters when choosing a company that understands what you are giving them and can be trusted to transfer it on the proper equipment with the proper cables. I would steer clear of the big national companies if this is your goal. They generally treat all VHS tapes the same—no surprise there.

Three Fun Facts (For Those Who Just Can't Get Enough…)

1. Some regular VHS tapes were secretly recorded in S-VHS quality. Later S-VHS machines introduced a feature called S-VHS ET (Expansion Technology). This allowed users to record S-VHS-level quality onto regular VHS tapes. The catch was that these tapes almost always needed to be played on an S-VHS machine.

   Even so, it's fascinating to think that some ordinary-looking VHS tapes may actually contain higher-quality recordings.

2. Most people never saw the S-VHS format at its best because of limitations in their televisions. For example, you might have played your wedding tape in your S-VHS machine at home, but many televisions of that era didn't include S-Video inputs. As a result, the video had to be viewed using lower-quality composite cables.

3. Did you know that after S-VHS, D-VHS was introduced by JVC in 1998? Yes—digital VHS! It could support resolutions such as 720p and 1080i. Although it was never widely adopted, it's remarkable to think how adaptable the VHS format remained more than 20 years after its introduction.

I'll leave you with that for this issue. If nothing else, you're now armed with a little video trivia should you ever need it.

Lives are important.
Our mission is to connect them to future generations the best way possible.

Finally, if you have a topic you'd like me to write about, let me know at **stilson@stilson.com** and I'll add it to the list.

— Bill Stilson
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