

Indies Going Blu — Slowly

By Chris Tribbey

SUPPLIER Warner Bros.' Blu-ray Disc decision has made things easier for independents. They're increasingly going Blu.

They're just not going Blu too fast. "At this point, it looks as if the clear winner of the format war is Blu-ray," said Badie Ali, EVP of MPI Media Group. "All the recent activity in the industry has illustrated

this, and it has definitely impacted MPI's stance on the future high-definition format."

Anime distributor ADV Films announced this month that it will do Blu-ray this spring.

"It's not so much that we made a decision, but that the decision was made for us," said ADV Films' Chris Oarr.

Topics Entertainment has announced two of its titles for Blu-ray only, after originally backing off because of Paramount's HD DVD-exclusive move.

Echo Bridge Home Entertainment this month announced six titles for Blu-ray, each for a format-low \$14.95.

National Geographic's going Blu, at least with titles not co-produced with other companies.

And Surround Records, which originally was releasing its multi-channel audio releases only on HD DVD, will give Blu-ray owners the same offerings this spring.

"Our company will stick to the original idea [of being format agnostic], but we will be accommodating all market changes," said Alexander

Golberg Jero, a producer with Surround Records.

Also Opus Arte, which had been releasing only HD DVD, announced it would release on both formats in the future.

Koch Entertainment Distribution has released several titles on both formats, but is rethinking its strategy.

"It is becoming quite clear that the war is being won by Blu-ray, and with that we're now fully exploring a plan of action," said Dan Gurlitz, VP and GM of Koch Entertainment Distribution. "Koch and its family of labels are watching this very closely."

Warner's decision to side with Blu-ray isn't the only move to sway certain indies, said Frank Djeng, product marketing manager for Tai Seng Entertainment. The market's reaction to Warner's decision was just as significant, he said.

"With the current one-two punch of Best Buy preferring Blu-ray and Netflix eventually ceasing rentals of HD DVDs, we feel that our future tests on high-def should solely be on Blu-ray," Djeng said.

Tai Seng Entertainment previously supported both HD DVD and Blu-ray.

"All these developments certainly play a role in the direction and future of the industry. Warner's decision, among many other factors, has definitely made our decision easier," MPI's Ali said.

"More than anything, consumers drive demand, and they have illustrated to the industry that they want

Blu-ray."

"We are a Blu-ray company and will author and distribute titles in that format," said Donald Liebenson, director of communications for Questar Inc.

"The obstacles thus far have been authoring and replication costs and consumer demand, which hasn't been that strong yet. Warner's decision did not make a possible decision easier or more difficult. It was more reassuring."

Questar's first Blu-rays will be for the PBS "Nature" series.

There are still some independents in HD DVD's corner, including Vanguard Cinema and EuroArts.

Others are doing both, including Digital Leisure and First Look. And there are still many sitting on the sidelines or releasing only a handful of high-def titles.

"We're still maintaining an overall wait-and-see mentality with respect to moving forward on multiple titles," said MTI Home Video president and CEO Larry Brahms. MTI's *Pirates* and *Pirates II* are headed to Blu-ray, but that's it for now.

"My hope is that by the later part of the year mastering and replication pricing will drop to a point where we will be able to better test the waters."

"The format war has really made it difficult for us to dive into any specific format, especially considering the high costs of indulging in either," MPI's Ali said. **HM**



■ Indies in HD

HD DVD

City Lights, EuroArts, Genius Products, HD Entertainment, Phoenix Entertainment, Rhino Home Entertainment, SPV, The Picture Company, Vanguard Cinema

BLU-RAY

ADV Films, Anchor Bay Entertainment, Echo Bridge Entertainment, FUNimation Entertainment, Questar, LRS Media, MTI Video, National Geographic, Nothing Records, Razor Digital Entertainment, Tartan Video, Topics, Tai Seng Entertainment

BOTH

Bandai Entertainment, BCI/Eclipse, BBC/Discovery Channel, Digital Leisure, DVD International, Eagle Rock Entertainment, First Look Studios, HDenvironments, HDNet, Image Entertainment, Imax, Koch, Magnolia Home Entertainment, Mantra Films, Opus Arte, Surround Records