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ULTRADECK

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MoFi UltraDeck+M

Mobile Fidelity, champion of audiophile vinyl, has succumbed to the lure of producing its own turntables, like record labels of the past: enter the MoFi UltraDeck
 Review: **Ken Kessler Lab: Paul Miller**

Back in the early days of audio, numerous record labels had electronics divisions, or vice versa. You would see the logos of EMI, Philips, RCA, Decca, JVC and others on both LPs sleeves and hardware. The logic was that they originated the material and could also control the entire chain, from artist to listener. So, who better to introduce its own turntables than Mobile Fidelity, for decades the most prolific source of audiophile LPs? Now you can spin its platters on, well, its platters.

Enter the new range of MoFi turntables, two models offered with or without cartridges, though all come with tonearms. It starts with the base version of the StudioDeck at £1199 without cartridge, up to the UltraDeck+M with pre-mounted MasterTracker moving-magnet cartridge at £2499. The dearer model features a heavier platter, a more substantial plinth and isolating feet, and that's what we're reviewing here.

PASS THE PUCK

In the box is a hinged dustcover [see p37] and a stylus brush, but the review sample also arrived with the optional, 3in diameter, 367g Super Heavyweight 'Noise Dissipation' Record Weight. This puck adds £199 to the price, but I would consider it a mandatory purchase. Yes, it really is that much of an improvement, but read on...

As the UltraDeck without cartridge costs £1999, the main object of this review is the turntable itself, sans cartridge and any extras, such as the optional weight. However, it must be stressed that buying any of the Mo-Fi decks with cartridges earns a substantial saving. The MasterTracker fitted to the review deck – the top of the three-model MoFi cartridge range – costs £799 on its own, so that's

RIGHT: Developed with Allen Perkins of Spiral Groove, the UltraDeck has an alloy/MDF sandwich chassis and 33mm-thick Delrin platter running on a substantial inverted bearing

a £300 discount. That also happens to be the price of the less expensive of the two MoFi phono stages (to be reviewed soon).

With or without cartridge or record weight, the choices do raise a question. I do get the appeal of 'turnkey' turntables, ready to use with minimal fuss, especially if aimed at newcomers who may have

'When I fitted the lime-green Jo N°5... wow! What a look!'

no experience with LPs. However, I admit to having no idea what the ratio is of complete turntable-with-cartridge packages sold versus decks on their own.

Hmmm... this warrants a call to MoFi, Clearaudio, Pro-Ject and others,

because I suspect audiophiles rather than beginners would prefer to choose their own pick-ups, arms, etc. Trust me, however convenient, complete and easy-to-use it certainly is, the UltraDeck is not a beginners-only turntable but one worthy of finding space in a system owned by an experienced enthusiast, upgrading to the

£1500-£2500 sector. Whichever level of equipment is purchased, this and its sibling are tweaking-friendly, and not just because they beg the purchase of the added record weight. The Delrin platter, for example, has a rock-hard top surface, and even using MoFi's own superlative record brush finds the LP slipping on the platter if you don't have the weight or some other clamp locking down the record.

CABLE NEWS

Further proof of tweakability? Take a look at the back [p39]. As is now the trend, the unit does not feature a captive audio lead. Instead there are sockets into which you insert the high-quality 1m cable supplied with the UltraDeck, an RCA-plugged phono-to-phono lead with earthing wire, made by Cardas. Those sockets enable cable obsessives to play with other wires with ease, even hooking it up with leads costing more than the deck itself!

In the manner of certain Pro-Jects, Regas and other decks without fully-sprung



suspensions, initial set-up requires nothing more than a solid, flat surface and a spirit level as the feet are height-adjustable. This is, however, a deck with a larger-than-usual footprint, so allow space for a substantial 500x362mm (wd) plinth plus cable egress from the back and free air above it for the opening of a dust cover. Weight is a chunky 10.5kg, so this will please the tyre-kickers.

With the cartridge pre-mounted in the review deck, all I had to do was ease the platter over the vertical bearing, balance the arm, apply tracking force and fit the hanging-weight-on-a-thread for anti-skating. While this may seem daunting to novices, the instructions are thorough. For you lot, it will be instinctive. The belt is fitted around the pulley and platter, with speed change from 33.33rpm to 45rpm accomplished by moving the belt to the larger, lower section of the pulley.

On/off is a square press-button on the top of the plinth, lower right, and it lights up yellow/orange – to match the belt. The overall look is sleek, with the contrasting finishes on the deck's upper surface, and those hints of citrus breaking up the Spinal Tappishness of it. And when I fitted the lime-green Jo N°5 MC cartridge [HFN Dec '18]... wow! What a look!

Which brings me to the tonearm and cartridge. As editor PM points out [see boxout, below], the specification is unusual in that the arm is high-mass and requires medium-to-low compliance cartridges, with MoFi's own MMs defying the high-compliance norm. I tried the Jo N°5 not to confuse myself but to confirm my belief that the arm will survive many a cartridge

ABOVE: The UltraDeck is distinguished from its more affordable sibling, the StudioDeck, by the thicker and heavier Delrin platter, laminated plinth and isolating feet developed by HRS

upgrade. The arm's ease of set-up is exemplary, and the deck comes with the tools for setting height and azimuth.

ALL HANDS ON DECK

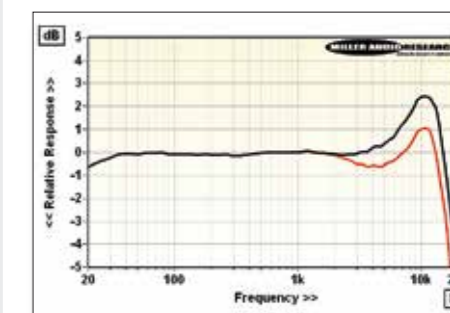
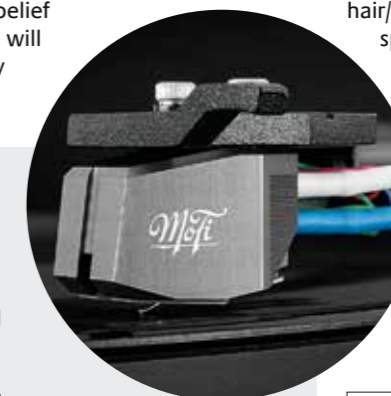
Running concurrently with my other reviews in this issue, listening commenced with Silverhead's *16 And Savaged* [Purple Records TPSA7511], notable for its punch and attack, crystalline guitar sounds and powerful lower octaves – fronted by a vocalist who ticks every box in the big-hair/whippet-thin/wish-I-was-Robert-Plant specs list. The UltraDeck+M conveyed the sheer force of this glam/metal mix, the title track leaping from the speakers with the militaristic drumming nearly as crisp and forceful as one could hope for from a deck this minimalist.

Of course, it was unfair to listen to this after hearing it on the TechDAS Air Force III Premium [HFN Jun '19], but I'm a big boy and I can spell the word 'context.' What →

MASTERTRACKER

MoFi's Ultra 10in alloy tonearm has an effective mass a little over 30g so, to avoid an arm/cartridge resonance that falls within the warp range of an LP, users will need to ensure any ~10g pick-up has a dynamic compliance that's <25cu, and ideally around 15cu. Unsurprisingly, the supplied MasterTracker pick-up is designed for the task, offering – by typical MM standards – a relatively low 13cu dynamic compliance, pushing the arm/cartridge resonance back to a relatively safe 8Hz. At the recommended 2g, tracking performance is excellent for a low compliance design, this pick-up with its 'Micro-Line' stylus clearing a 70-80µm groove pitch and very tough +18dB modulation (315Hz lateral cut, re. 11.2µm) at 0.75% THD. Output is better than the specified 3mV at 3.9mV/5cm/sec.

The frequency response [see Graph, right] shows a high treble boost at 12kHz but the MasterTracker's 'V-Twin dual-magnet generator' is evidently very symmetrical, as evidenced by the matched L+R and L-R traces. The same is true of distortion vs. frequency (not shown) – typically ~1% from 20Hz-2kHz and never rising above 4% (-8dB re. 5cm/sec) at 20kHz thanks, in part, to the -5dB/20kHz roll-off here. Nevertheless, the symmetry of response and distortion on lateral and vertical cuts is superb, promoting a highly uniform 'colour' front-to-back and left-to-right across the soundstage. PM



ABOVE: Frequency response curves for the MasterTracker MM, (-8dB re. 5cm/sec) lateral (L+R, black) versus vertical (L-R, red)

TURNTABLE PACKAGE



ABOVE: The heavyweight 10in Ultra tonearm has an aluminium main tube and friction-locked counterweight. It has provision to adjust azimuth at the headshell and VTA at the arm base

transformed it was the addition of, yes, the Noise Dissipation Record Weight. It was the same again with far less aggressive, audibly gentler material, such as Dusty Springfield's 'The Look Of Love' via Classic Records' 12in single version [CR-5005-12].

Again, I listened with and without the weight (or, perhaps, any 'universal' clamp or puck), which hands the listener two benefits. The first is practical: it mates the LP to the inherently slippery platter, a pain in the derriere when using a dust brush and you're trying to get those wee carbon fibres down into the groove. The second is the overall improvement in sound, most notable in the lower registers' control, an audible reduction in groove whoosh and slightly more incisive upper registers.

Without it, the sound is fine, but mainly tilted toward the 'trebly'. With it, there's an undeniable gain in overall refinement, especially a reduction in sibilants – and often that's in the recording rather than the playback chain, as in lots of 1970s Left Coast recordings. Crucial to 'The Look Of Love', however, are the subtle characteristics – OK, not-so-subtle – of Dusty's voice, especially the huskiness, and for soundstage addicts, the sense of air.

Believe me, this performance hasn't had a permanent spot in the Audiophile Top 10 for five decades because it's substandard. This track reveals so much about a system,

thanks to its near-perfect sound, that it can – for seasoned listeners – tell them everything they need to know with a single playing. The UltraDeck, with fitted cartridge, was not embarrassed by this toughest of challenges.

SOUNDING GLORIOUS

Confession time. I didn't bother feeding this with a slew of Mobile Fidelity pressings for a number of reasons, especially because they make most systems sound better than they might, and because there's every reason to believe that the UltraDeck and the MasterTracker cartridge were voiced with Mobile Fidelity albums. That said, The Band's eponymous second LP [MFSL 1-419] sounded glorious, especially Levon Helm's drumming, while Garth Hudson's massive-sounding Lowrey organ was imbued with enough scale to dispel any thoughts of this being a 'budget' deck.

Instead, I was reminded repeatedly that this is – newbie appeal notwithstanding – an 'enthusiast's' deck. That's because I couldn't stay in turnkey mode and just use the deck as is. I kept returning to use the Noise Dissipation Record Weight, despite £199 being a serious chunk of change for a metal disc. If you happen to have another puck or clamp lying around, try it first. MoFi might consider adding another combo offer to the catalogue, that of the supplying the decks with the record weight as well, for further savings. As for mats...

This is an area I didn't want to deal with, as they are as varied as stands and cables, and range in price from a few quid to a small fortune. Glass, felt, cork, rubber, *ad infinitum* – suffice it to say, I don't have an issue with the sound of hard-surface platters, so ➤

'For seasoned listeners, it tells them everything they need to know'



JOSH BIZAR

Josh Bizar, Vice President of Music Direct, spoke to *HFN* about Mobile Fidelity's move into the hardware sector. 'In 1999, when Music Direct owner Jim Davis purchased Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab, our company was flooded with calls to purchase the label's out-of-print discs. Many asked us which turntables, cartridges and phono stages would help get the most from their collections. That's when my idea for MoFi Electronics began to take shape. It took another 15 years to develop the business plan, put the proper team in place and build a factory in the US.'

With a team consisting of group leader John Schaffer of Wadia, Allen Perkins of Spiral Groove as product engineering partner, and in-house industrial engineer Jim Baker, 'We were off and running'.

Bizar says it took four years to develop and manufacture the first components. 'We tested many materials for the platter and bearing. We experimented with motors. We listened to different tonearm cables. Michael Latvis at HRS helped us develop special isolation feet and the weight to help eliminate vibration.'

'We are currently deep into the next round of product development. A long term technology partner, Tim de Paravicini, who was instrumental in the design of our StudioPhono phono stage, has come up with a remarkable amp design, and we have other products in the pipeline. Mobile Fidelity will eventually be part of the entire signal chain – from the Original Master Recording through to your speakers.'



TURNTABLE PACKAGE



ABOVE: No external PSU here but (unusually) a direct AC mains power connection. Tonearm wiring is by Cardas Audio, terminated in RCA outputs and a ground post

much as the way an LP mates to it. For cost-effective experimentation, should this bother you, visit amazon.co.uk and buy a felt one for under a fiver, just to hear if there's a difference. At worst, you can use it as a hot pad in the kitchen.

I tried it with a generic felt mat and the puck, and it was a trade-off. The bass became less forward – 'lively' is the term that best describes the overall character of the UltraDeck – but there was a slight loss of impact in the midband. With *The Living Presence Stereo Sampler* [Fontana SFXL52], Baroque Brass's 'A Taste Of Honey' was less incisive, the edges of the soundstage not quite as specifically demarcated. As with every tweak, there are plusses and minuses.

OPENING BELTER

But back to the UltraDeck *au naturel*. The same LP is filled with glossy big band extravaganzas, designed to convey stage width as much as anything else, and the UltraDeck+M combination spread the sound across the room with both the chorale tracks and the powerful Band Of The Scots Guards. Again, I kept hearing the word 'lively,' which is another way of saying that the deck was more *simpatico* with KEF LS50s [HFN Jul '12] than LS3/5as [p44], but the latter exploited the front-end's warm midband.

Here was a chance to listen to a much younger Rod Stewart, when fronting the Jeff Beck Group on *Beck-Ola* [Epic/Sundazed LPS311]. Detractors speak only of his rasp, but the UltraDeck+M cut revealed the more mellow/melodic vocals underneath, even in the opening belter, 'All Shook Up'. Better still was its handling of 'Spanish Boots', with Ron Wood playing bass as if trying to match Beck's guitar note-for-note.

Here the UltraDeck+M again belied its price/heft category, like a boxer knocking out a contender in the next weight class. This track can sound muddled on lesser systems, but the MasterTracker kept the panning guitars on course, Wood's fretwork had distinct form, mass and richness separate from the muscular percussion. And Stewart? His vocals sat in the midst of this almost-frantic melee, but in perfect focus.

There's something else, an intangible quality, perhaps, that must be attributed to the UltraDeck. While the performance is, for most audiophiles, the be-all and end-all of a product's worth, and it remains arguably the primary determinant (after price) as to whether or not one wishes to purchase a given product, the MoFi UltraDeck+M is blessed with that most precious of values: credibility.

How so? It comes from a manufacturer that has few rivals in its understanding of LP playback, while it was designed by a hugely-respected industry veteran of impeccable credentials. What the puck: respect has been earned. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Having followed this deck's growth over a number of shows, I'd say MoFi has addressed brilliantly the needs of both audiophiles and newcomers. Its potential to keep at bay any nagging urge to upgrade is due to its accommodation of affordable accessories and an arm that accepts high-end moving-coils. The UltraDeck is a dream choice for those who want components that can evolve along with them.

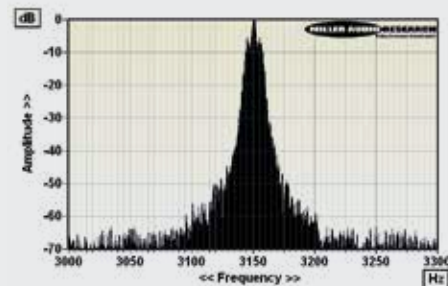
Sound Quality: 88%



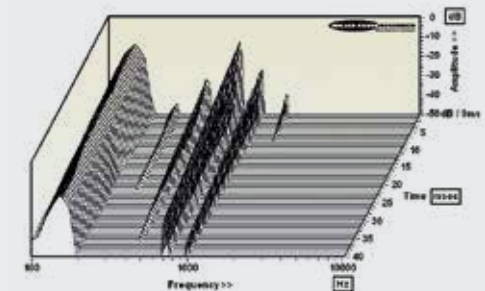
MOFI ULTRADECK

MoFi's flagship turntable is elegant in its simplicity but also ruggedly constructed. The bronze-sleeved bearing features a sapphire thrust pad and runs on an inverted steel spindle, although this is arguably 'overkill' to support the 3.1kg Delrin platter! Longevity is all but assured and while the –68.0dB through-bearing rumble (DIN-B wtd, re. 5cm/sec) is about average for a deck at this price, the through-groove rumble was more impressive at –71.4dB. In practice, the latter figure is really what matters. The torque generated by the 300rpm AC synchronous motor is partially lost by belt slippage on start-up, but the 4sec 'boot time' is more than swift enough. Absolute speed was all but bang on, with an error of just +0.05%, and very little low-rate drift, but wow was just a little higher than anticipated at 0.07% (peak wtd). Sidebands at ±5Hz are visible [see Graph 1, below] but higher-rate flutter is lower at 0.04% and essentially uncorrelated (noise-like).

Despite only accommodating cartridges up to ~10g in bodyweight [the supplied MasterTracker MM weighs 9.7g – see p35], MoFi's 10in alloy tonearm is a real heavyweight with an effective mass a little over 30g. This high mass not only best suits lower compliance pick-ups but it also explains the Q and definition of the bold resonances seen on the CSD waterfall plot [Graph 2, below]. The main bending mode is clear at 145Hz as are the harmonic/torsional modes at 440Hz, 710Hz and 980Hz. Some additional damping would certainly benefit the arm's performance although its elegant gimbal/ballrace bearings are beyond reproach at the price – absolutely free of any play while offering a very low <10mg friction. PM



ABOVE: Wow and flutter re. 3150Hz tone at 5cm/sec (plotted ±150Hz, 5Hz per minor division)



ABOVE: Cumulative tonearm resonant decay spectrum, illustrating various bearing, pillar and 'tube' vibration modes spanning 100Hz-10kHz over 40msec

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

| | |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------|
| Turntable speed error at 33.33rpm | 33.34rpm (+0.05%) |
| Time to audible stabilisation | 4sec |
| Peak Wow/Flutter | 0.07% / 0.04% |
| Rumble (silent groove, DIN B wtd) | –71.4dB |
| Rumble (through bearing, DIN B wtd) | –68.0dB |
| Hum & Noise (unwtd, rel. to 5cm/sec) | –59.7dB |
| Power Consumption | 5W (<1W idle) |
| Dimensions (WHD) / Weight | 500x152x362mm / 10.5kg |