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MoFi Electronics

UltraDeck+ Turntable and StudioPhono Phonostage

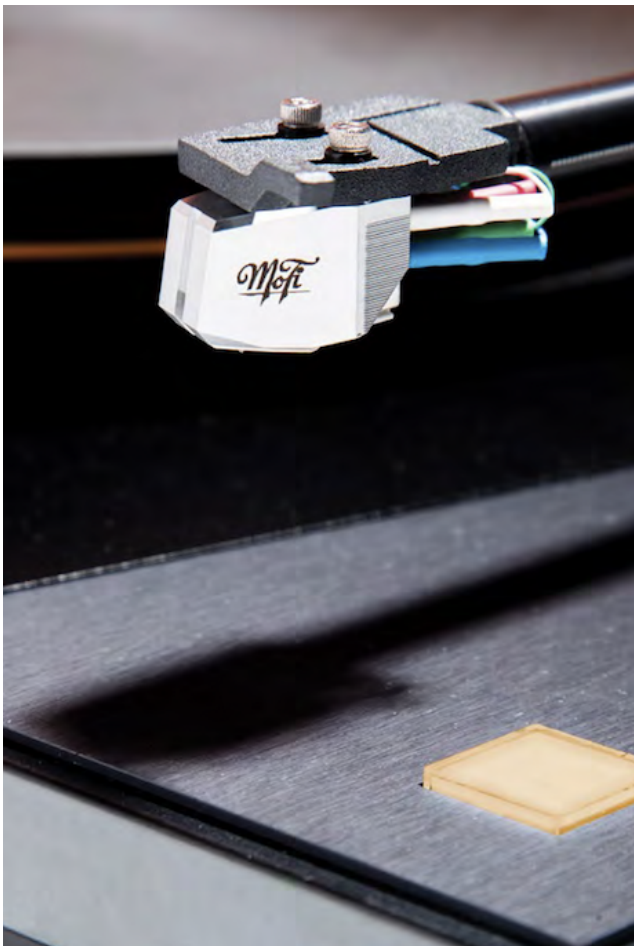
Review by Julie Mullins



When it comes to audiophilia, great sound starts with the source. And of all the audiophile gear out there, it's the turntable that stands—or spins—alone as an enduring symbol for high fidelity. From the earliest turn-of-the-20th-century Victrolas and vintage portable Crosleys, to the Linn Sondeks of the hobby's heyday, DJs' beloved Technics SL-1200s, and today's Acoustic Signature Invictus behemoth, in its basic design fundamentals the turntable represents high-end audio culture par excellence. I went to see a Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra performance with my audiophile dad a few weeks ago and asked for a closer look at his cufflinks. They were little chrome turntables with tiny tonearms.

My earliest musical memories mostly came from my father's hi-fi system. Even as a wide-eyed innocent, I knew that those majestically glowing tubes on the McIntosh had plenty to do with the gorgeous and thrilling sounds coming through the speakers, and this intrigued me. Spinning records was where the magic began.

On my own kiddie record player, which might have been a Fischer-Price something or other, I remember listening to Prokofiev's Peter and the Wolf, along with some Disney soundtracks. When I was ten years old, my father put together a little system of my own for Christmas: a basic Audio-Technica table, a pair of little Infinity bookshelf speakers, and an Advent 300 receiver. In time, my dad taught me how to power up his hi-fi system and let me play back records on it. I handled each step, each flip of a preamp switch, each turn of an amplifier knob, with reverence. But most of all, I took care placing the needle on the record—it was that final moment of precise handling that always made me a little nervous. I'd steady my hand and hold my breath as the tonearm with mounted cartridge made its slow smooth descent, the stylus gently dropping into the groove just before silence gave way to glorious sound.



As any analog lover knows, vinyl records, both vintage and new, are back in high demand today. And with its nearly forty years of history in the record-mastering-and-pressing biz, Mobile Fidelity is certainly a star in the record business. What is new is the company's decision to produce its own turntables to play those records back on. Since there is no shortage of well-priced offerings from the likes of Rega, Audio-Technica, Pro-Ject, etc., why make and market another one? It turns out the idea was the brainchild of Music Direct—the parent company that owns Mobile Fidelity and a number of other hi-fi brands—and its Vice President Josh Bizar, for whom developing a turntable had been a longtime goal, as well as a logical extension of the vinyl-focused MoFi brand. (See sidebar interview with Josh.) Since its founding in 1977 (by audiophiles), Mobile Fidelity has been committed to high-fidelity recordings and to improving upon industry standards by pioneering new technologies. As an established and trusted brand, it has a lot to live up to.

Its website states, "Mobile Fidelity believes that mastering systems should be neutral and transparent. The essential idea is to unveil all the detailed musical information on the original recording without adding deterioration, coloration, or other sonic artifacts." What better way to achieve this—and offer more to one's customers—than to develop an analog front end that drives home this same approach?

And so a new "hardware" division of the company was born: MoFi Electronics. It was a bold move not only to venture into selling hardware but also to build a manufacturing facility to produce it in the U.S. Since a MoFi-branded turntable needed to be more than just another pretty plinth and platter, Josh Bizar and his team brought in some heavy hitters: John Schaffer, former owner of Wadia and current President of MoFi Electronics, and Allen Perkins, the illustrious turntable and tonearm designer behind the Spiral Groove



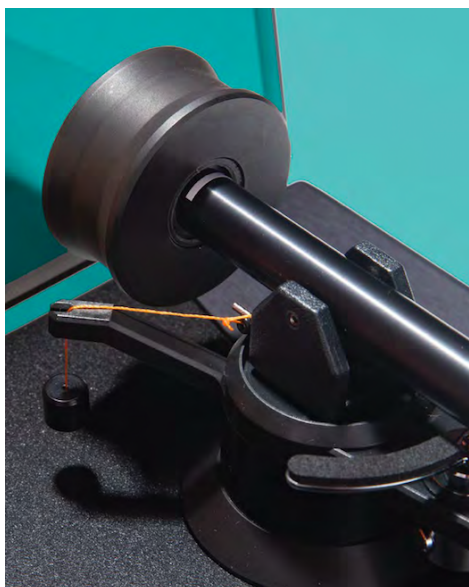
brand (his \$36,000 SG 1.2 turntable, reviewed in Issue 276, was named a TAS Product of the Year in 2017). Like so many inaugural projects this one was a long time coming—it has been nearly two years since the first models were announced—but it was worth the wait.

The rubber meets the road for MoFi Electronics less than 50 miles from Detroit in Ann Arbor, Michigan, where Mobile Fidelity's new UltraDeck and StudioDeck turntables are made. Why there? In part because this is where Wadia's production facilities were located, and where John Schaffer still lives and works, surrounded by his own network of people. John likes to be hands-on with the assembly operations, so it made sense to establish the new factory where he was located.

Allen Perkins came on board as an expert collaborator for the project early on, and the timing was really good for him. "I was coming to a point where I wanted to get lower-priced products out there, but I didn't have any that fit my company [Spiral Groove]," he said. "So this was a great opportunity for me to say that my design principles can work at all price points." (See sidebar interview for more.)

There are two tiers of turntables and phonostages (plus three cartridges) currently available through MoFi Electronics; each product bears either the "Ultra" or "Studio" prefix in its name: the UltraDeck and the StudioDeck tables (\$1799 and \$1199, respectively), and the UltraPhono and StudioPhono phonostages (\$499 and \$249). There's also a "+" upgrade option for each turntable—an additional \$200 for UltraDeck+ or \$150 for StudioDeck+—that includes an UltraTracker or StudioTracker mm cartridge preinstalled at the factory. An optional 13-ounce MoFi Super Heavyweight record weight (\$199) completes the lineup. Under review here is the UltraDeck+ (\$1999) and StudioPhono (\$249) combination. Though this review emphasizes the UltraDeck table, a few words on the phonostages are in order: Adjustable loading and selectable gain are offered for mm and mc cartridges. Both phonostages come with an external power supply, so their rectangular form factor stays clean and compact; only a small yellow light and two small

square buttons for subsonic filter and mono options —very pro-audio in look—are on the front beneath a tasteful logo up top. (The UltraPhono model also contains a Class A headphone amp and a dial for a 31-step volume control, plus an additional 6dB better signal-to-noise ratio.)



The two MoFi turntable models have some key attributes in common: Both are belt-driven, feature isolated AC synchronous motors and constrained-layer-damped chassis (the UltraDeck has three aluminum plates bonded to its MDF plinth, the StudioDeck has just one), and offer 33 1/3 and 45rpm speed options (changed manually by moving the belt's position on the Delrin pulley). Although both come with Delrin platters, the UltraDeck's is 1.3" thick and weighs almost twice as much as the StudioDeck's (6.8 lbs. versus 3.8 lbs. and 3/4" thick). Allen explained that Delrin is materially close to vinyl, so it's a good mechanical impedance match. He also chose it because it tends to be quiet, and it machines very easily, which helps keep costs down while offering solid performance as a single-material platter. The UltraDeck's tonearm contains upgraded Cardas Audio wiring from the headshell through the

gold-plated RCA connectors. The 10" aluminum arms on both models use high-quality ball bearings in a gimbaled design for lower friction and quiet operation.

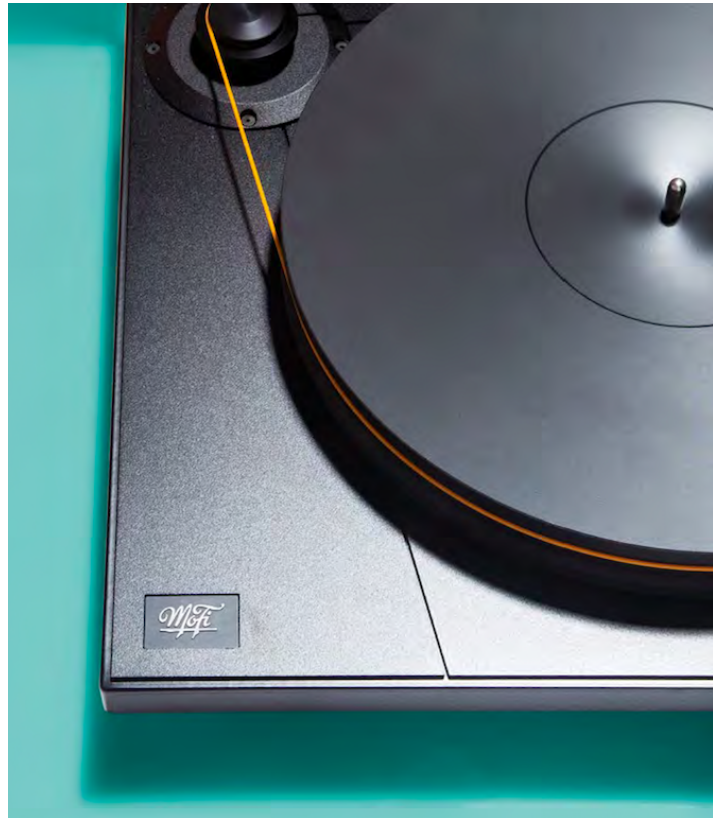
Those music lovers who might be nervous about turntable and cartridge setup, fear not. MoFi has you covered. The turntables come with simple instructions for assembly, which really only involves attaching the platter, belt, tonearm counterweight, and anti-skate weight. My UltraDeck+ review sample arrived with the Japanese-made UltraTracker cartridge pre-installed at the factory; with this "+" option MoFi wanted to make life easier for the end user (and eliminate set-up anxiety as a potential barrier to upgrading to a better turntable). A downloadable user guide provides step-by-step instructions and clear illustrations for assembly. Josh Bizar and Jonathan Derda (of MoFi Distribution) were on-hand for my initial setup, but the whole process only took a matter of minutes.

As befits any well-made 'table, the MoFi decks allow adjustments to tracking force, VTA, azimuth, and anti-skate. This should please tweakier audiophiles (although I adjusted just the first two). In addition to the parts mentioned above, the turntable also conveniently comes with a couple of hex wrenches, a stylus brush, RCA interconnects, and a detachable dustcover in a storm-cloud grey tint. One item you might want on-hand is a bubble level (or an app for that). (Some other 'tables in this category have levels embedded in the plinth.) The feet, which were conceived and designed by Mike Latvis of high-end equipment-rack-and-accessories-maker HRS (Harmonic Resolution Systems), are easily adjustable. Another nice feature: The MoFi turntables are equipped with an IEC connector so you can use the included power cord or one of your own choice. All told, even an analog novice should have what he or she needs to get up and running...or spinning.

Aesthetically the UltraDeck is not a flashy design, nor was it meant to be. It strikes the perfect balance between being no-nonsense and straightforward yet stylish, with thoughtful details that reflect the MoFi brand's purpose and ideals. Conceived in close collaboration with Allen Perkins on the technical and materials side, and with MoFi

designer Jim Baker on the industrial side, these customized tables embody what Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab is known for: faithfully reproduced music for listeners at home. A distinctive studio-inspired detail is a small, square, yellow-lit power button—a nod to the look and feel of the control buttons on a tape deck, like the souped-up Studer in Mobile Fidelity's Sebastapol, California, mastering facility. A similar yellow light and square pushbuttons are also found on the MoFi phonostages. This (literal) touchpoint carries over the brand's philosophy both visually and ergonomically.

Right from the start I was struck by the sense of presence and immediacy in the MoFi's playback. Indeed Allen's applied principles and prioritization of speed stability, thanks in part to the AC synchronous motor, delivered the much-sought-after image depth and breadth—substance, if you will. After I let the motor run for hours over a few days of break-in, the sound got better and better. Image definition, detail, and stability improved, along with ever-increasing amounts of smoothness and ease. Overall musicality was another positive constant. I was astonished at how quiet backgrounds were, especially on good recordings. Surely the little StudioPhono deserves partial credit here.



On Joni Mitchell's *Blue*, the harmonics, particularly on the dulcimer on "All I Want," rang true. The emotional expression behind her singing shined through with plenty of breath and energy in a lively and lovely presentation. Decays on piano chords took their time fading against a quiet backdrop. Nor did the MoFi shy away from the jump-swing style piano boogie of "Saturday Night Fish Fry" from Jon Hendricks' *Fast Livin' Blues* [ORG]. The rapid-fire upright bass plucking was delivered with substantial impact and snappy control. The midrange, notably on brass and vocals, took a front seat. All instruments were rendered with bloom and dimensionality.

Madeliene Peyroux's "Don't Wait Too Long" from *Careless Love* [Mobile Fidelity] was solidly imaged and slightly forward. Her and the musicians' placement within the soundstage seemed pretty spot-on. Once again, body and bloom were registered galore, from subtle snare brushstrokes to double-bass plucks. Turning to something more raucous, I played the MoFi LP reissue of the Pixies' *Doolittle*. The UltraDeck+ and StudioPhono combo handled the hard-hitting percussion, and both the grungy lead and rhythm guitar licks admirably. The wild layers were all there yet effortlessly controlled. On "Monkey Gone to Heaven" the low-key cello strings emerged with lifelike presence rather than fading into the background.

For some time now I've been enjoying the Acoustic Signature Challenger Mk. 3 turntable as my analog reference. With its upgraded TA-2000 tonearm and the superb Air Tight PC-7 mc cartridge this front-end setup tallies into the \$5k–\$6k range. Knowing full well that the

MoFi UltraDeck+ wasn't in the same price category, I'll admit I had some slight reservations—as well as a strong curiosity—about taking the MoFi UltraDeck for a spin. Immediately, however, I was delighted...relieved? (Surprised isn't the right word; I trusted that MoFi wouldn't put out something that wasn't ready for prime time.) As this hobby goes, the comparative differences from my reference setup could mainly be heard in the subtleties—in degrees of resolution. There was a slight softening of edges and a slight veiling or damping on some recordings. Soundstaging might not have had the same cavernous depths, but there was still a strong, stable sense of image placement. There was also a pleasant politeness to the proceedings—though this might also have been due in part to some inherent mc vs. mm cart differences. In other words, nothing about the MoFi offended or stuck out; all elements seem well balanced. Imaging, musicality, pitch stability, and presence emerged as strong themes throughout my listening.

Distinguishing itself as a cut (and then some) above the entry-level, the MoFi Electronics UltraDeck+ and StudioPhono system does its makers proud. It's bound to please a broad range of music lovers, who may or may not (yet) consider themselves audiophiles. Bottom line: The UltraDeck is a smartly conceived and finely honed design that's already earning its place as an instant classic.

Specifications

UltraDeck+ Turntable

Type: Belt-driven

Motor: 300 RPM AC synchronous

Dimensions: 19.69" x 6" x 14.25"

Weight: 23.1 lbs.

Tonearm (included)

Type: Straight aluminum, gimbaled bearing

Length: 10"

StudioPhono Phonostage

Type: Solid-state with external power supply

Gain: Selectable for mm or mc 40dB–66dB

Cartridge loading: Adjustable 75 ohms–47k ohms

Load impedance: mm, 47k ohms; mc, 75 ohms–47k ohms

Dimensions: 3 7/8" x 1 1/4" x 7 1/8"

Weight: 1 lb. 2 oz.