

Total ECLIPSE of the ART

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY RAFE ARNOTT

What do you do when you've owned a number of turntables over the years but always found one aspect of each design you've entertained to be wanting?

You design and build your own deck and start up a company to produce and bring them to market. This is exactly what John Stratton of Vancouver, British Columbia did when he decided he wanted a 'table that could deliver the sound he loved from high-price turntable designs but at a cost grounded more in reality.

The result was two decks: the Encore and the Eclipse, which both retail for roughly \$4,500 USD depending on the exact specifications at the time of ordering. The Encore features a traditional-style plinth and the Eclipse a modern take on shape.

Both feature 50mm Ultra MDF cores, CNC machining, precision bronze bearings, a 12-volt AC-synchronous motor and an outboard speed-controller with a separate linear power supply.

continued on page 63

REVIEW



When Stratton first reached out to me to see if I would be interested in reviewing one of his designs, I couldn't say no after checking his website and realizing he was located about 15 minutes from my home.

The unit he brought over was finished in beautiful matte Santos Rosewood (Stratton said that a high-gloss finish could be available as an option), and equipped with a package deal that included the Maestro outboard motor controller and a TA-1000 tonearm. He had kindly outfitted the deck with a Benz Micro Wood SL low-output moving-coil cartridge for me as well. Getting the 'table into my system took a matter of minutes, and after making sure the deck was levelled, I ran unbalanced cables into an Audio Note S2 step-up transformer and from there into an Audio Note Soro Phono SE Signature integrated amplifier and out to my Audio Note AN-E/Spe HE

loudspeakers.

I fed the Eclipse a steady diet of vinyl for several days to familiarize myself with its sonic abilities before I got down to taking a serious look at what made up the deck and how it sounded.

Taking off the large 36mm-thick Delrin platter and examining the bearing shaft, tonearm mount, dual-pulley driven polished-aluminum subplatter and fit and finish of the unit I came away with a deep respect for what Stratton and his crew had accomplished. QC was outstanding and the 'table would not have been embarrassed by other designs I'm familiar with at double the price point. The platter and sub-platter fit was truly precise and spun so true and flat that I often forgot I'd left it running because you had to be only a few inches away to see if it was actually spinning. Something I've not seen

accomplished on a few turntables pushing \$20k at trade shows.

Operation of the TA-1000 tonearm was fluid, well-damped and concise. This isn't an 'arm that flops around or feels flimsy: just the opposite. It has a feeling of such high-quality machining and fluidity to use that I often smiled whenever I queued-up a track and dropped the needle in the groove. Getting familiar with the sound took a while, but one of the first things I noticed was how rock-steady the pitch was. Stratton's attention to detail in the motor-control assemblies obviously paid off as did his use of a heavy, damped plinth because I've heard the Benz SL on other decks and the bass that was being produced with this combination was contributing more bottom-end definition and speed to the lowest notes than I'd ever heard previously from Benz Wood or Glider. continued on page 64

The treble signature was always open, airy and extended and never strayed into dryness or etching. A real feat on some of the LPs I spun which I'd heard go sour up top on other rigs.

Midrange was well balanced with tonal accuracy and transparency without sacrificing details like massed strings, or multiple guitar and horns.

Piano qualities in playback were smooth, well-rounded with beautiful rendering of timbre, ditto for cellos and violins which both had excellent weight and body.

Grabbing my copy of the Chromatics *Night Drive*, I was eerily transported by the title track's ambient

recording of a call from a pay phone that segues into a deep, rolling electronic

bass line synched with overdubs of Ruth Radelet's ethereal vocals. Keyboards were layered back into the sound stage with classic deep-vee 3D-rendering of the sparse guitar, drums and programming which make up the song.

The cover of Kate Bush's "Running Up That Hill" off the same side had Radelet's ghostly musings sparking goosebumps up my spine and showed off that sub-basement bass that I'd started to identify as the Eclipse letting that TA-1000 and Benz SL do their thing, all the while allowing the subtle synth work of Johnny Jewel and the hypnotic guitar riffing of Adam Miller to come through clearly defined and unruffled by what was going on

underneath them.

The Classic Records QUIEX SV-P 200-gram LP of Sonny Rollins *A Night at the "Village Vanguard"* that I own is one of my favourite live recordings. It's unassuming in its mic'ing of Rollins' tenor sax, Wilbur Ware's bass, and Elvin Jones' stick work. No one outshines the other, there is a delicate balance between the artists that is maintained throughout the session. The audience never becomes overly-intrusive like some live-venue recordings I own or have heard where cutlery can often be heard on plates as patrons dine. Not here. The focus is on the musicians.

I've heard this LP more times than

post-rock LP *Laughing Stock*, which features a large ensemble of session musicians backing up what was left of the group core in Mark Hollis and Lee Harris after Paul Webb's departure. More eerie-atmospherics exploiting the recorded space and about a specified environment that the listener is placed into, the LP is heavily punctuated with disparate instrumentation that bristles melodically all over the sound stage and has led lesser cartridge/tonearm/turntable combos astray into smearing of the many micro dynamics at play in every track.

Here the Eclipse did not put a foot wrong and carved out a clear space in the presentation for every in-

strument and Hollis' aching vocal tracks. Not uber high-end, and not necessarily budget-conscious, the

Pure Fidelity Eclipse turntable walks a line between the promise of big-money sound and what's practical from a materials and engineering standpoint at the sub-\$5K level. If I was forced to describe/compare the sound of the Eclipse I'd say it combines the PRAT (pace, rhythm and timing) of an RP8, the dynamics and resolution of a Clearaudio Ovation and a bottom end I'd more closely associate with something like a Dr. Feickert Analogue Woodpecker deck.

The Eclipse is a deck that Stratton wanted to incorporate those facets of turntable design he values highest into what he described as "the ultimate hybrid," I'd say he achieved his goals and then some. **T/O**

"Running Up That Hill off the same side had Radelet's ghostly musings sparking goosebumps up my spine..."

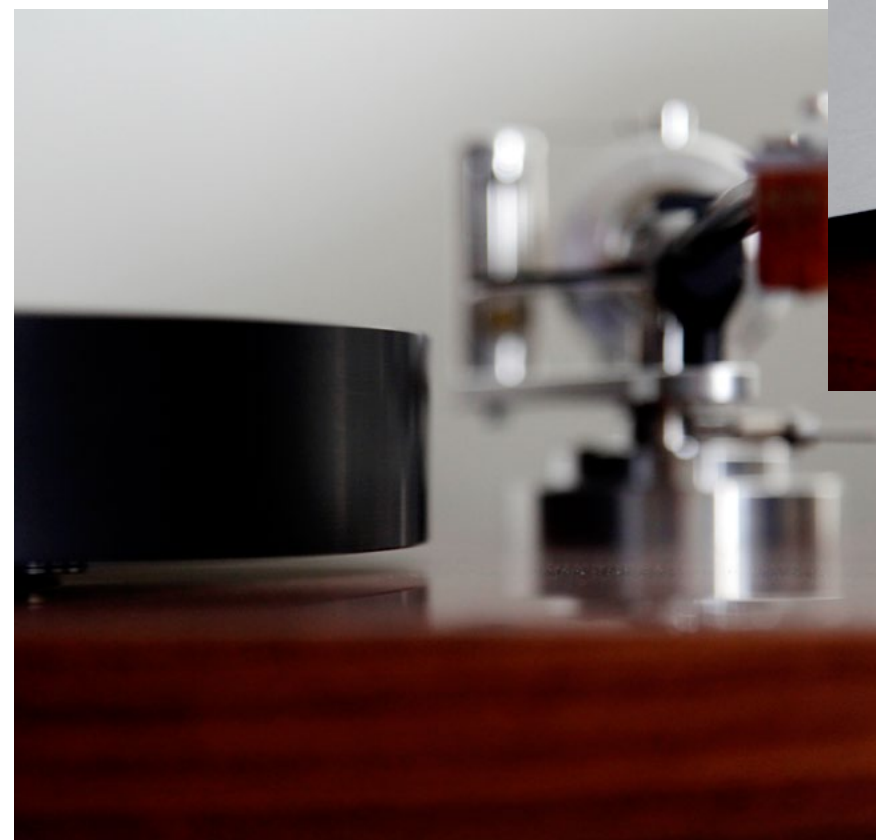
RAFE ARNOTT

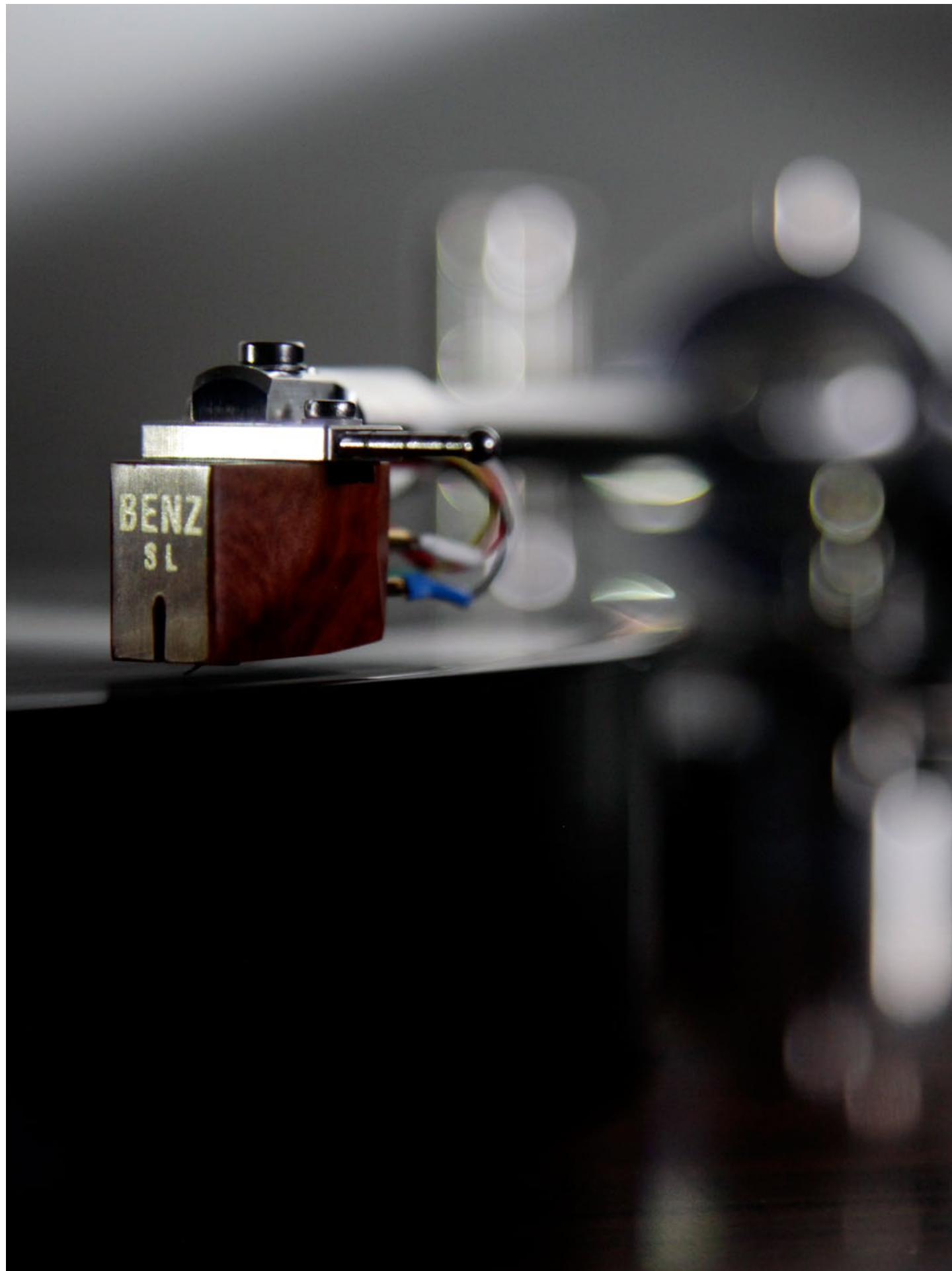
I can remember, but I've never heard it with this authoritative of a bottom end. Once again the Eclipse seems to allow the cartridge and tonearm to mine the depths of these grooves in a way that other tables I've played it on haven't been able to. Ware's finger fret work has organic texture with every brush of the strings during "Striver's Row," and Jones' skins have a papery-dry presence to every strike that comes through with clarity and speed on "Softly As In a Morning Sunrise." Rollins' sax blows hard and has real meaty punch with brassy hues apparent through every breath on "Old Devil Moon."

Switching things up I pulled out Talk Talk's last effort, their 1991

Pure Fidelity Eclipse Turntable w/Acoustic Signature
TA-1000 Tonearm \$4,495 USD

Pure Fidelity
sound@purefidelity.ca
www.purefidelity.ca





An interview with John Stratton of Pure Fidelity

Rafe Arnott: *John, you're coming into the high fidelity manufacturing marketplace later in your life, what was the drive to tackle something as complex as a turntable design after being an audiophile for many years? Do you have professional experience with audio engineering, or was it simply dissatisfaction with what you saw available at a certain price point?*

John Stratton: I have no previous experience in audio engineering, but I have owned an/or listened to a countless number of decks over the years. When I first started this venture it was, and still is, critically important to be able to distinguish between marketing hype and sound engineering. There are some lower and mid priced decks out in the marketplace that perform well, but there will always be that buyer that wants more because they have heard what more can sound like. I am one of those buyers and I was disillusioned by the asking prices. That is Pure Fidelity in a nutshell: High-end tables at real-world pricing.

RA: *Your current turntable designs seems to incorporate a number of key technical features seen on several other high-end brands, which is a great way to build a solid foundation to expand upon in my opinion. Did you draw inspiration from particular design aspects already in production, or did you have an initial concept for Pure Fidelity already in your mind's eye?*

JS: I would love to claim that our tables feature brand new engineering concepts and exotic materials, but our designs do borrow elements from other successful high-mass, low-mass and suspended decks. By identifying the strengths and more importantly the weaknesses of these different design approaches, we were able to come up with what we feel is the ultimate hybrid. I don't believe there is an "absolute best method" in turntable design. People don't like the word compromise, but in reality all the different methods of analog playback will have some areas that could be improved. It is a balancing act. Our designs adhere to a holistic approach, where all parts matter and no detail is too

small. However, the key element is our two-inch thick Ultra MDF core. Ultra MDF is a special make up. It is virtually resonance-free and completely neutral in sound. The bass response is strong and detailed without the sleepy nature you can get with some high-mass decks. The highs are nicely detailed without being bright – a common problem with most low-mass 'tables. To my ears tonal accuracy is absolutely a must and I think these designs nail it.

RA: *In your opinion, what are the most critical factors in turntable design to achieve the maximum ability of a tonearm to extract recorded information from a vinyl record's grooves?*

JS: To me the turntable's job is clearly defined. This is taken right off our site: "A turntable's job is to rotate at a precise and consistent speed. It needs to accomplish this without allowing any internal or external vibrations from entering into the chain. Our designs accomplish this with sound engineering, precision machining and carefully selected materials." In other words, the deck needs to get out of

the way and let the tonearm and cartridge deliver the magic.

RA: *Your turntables are beautiful to look at, and experience, as well as to use, how did you decide on what chassis shapes, and finishes you would use for the final prototypes? How important are aesthetics to you when it comes to making your decks? Is it really just form following function, or is there more to the process?*

JS: Thank you, I think our tables are beautiful too. I have always admired simple and elegant designs. Bling is not my thing. Using MDF as the core has allowed us to produce both wood and painted options. All our veneers are hand selected and our coloured plinths use automotive paint. Although the automotive paint is extremely expensive the end result is stunning. Both our wood and paint finishes go through an extensive multi-layered finishing process. The Encore is a more traditional "old school" shape and our Eclipse has a more modern shape. Aesthetics are very important to us. Our goal is to make decks that look and sound beautiful. **T/O**