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MoFi UltraGold

With a range of affordable turntables and a trio of MM pick-ups already in its catalogue, the launch of a premium MC has been long-anticipated from this supremo of the vinyl LP Review: **Ken Kessler Lab: Paul Miller**

One thought dominated my recent rediscovery of the old Decca (now London) cartridges: there was much to be said for record labels also manufacturing playback equipment. As had Decca, EMI, RCA, and a few others in the past, Mobile Fidelity, aka MoFi, has continued to demonstrate this synergy through its portfolio of turntables [HFN Jul '19 and Jan '20], phono stages [HFN Mar '20] and three MM cartridges [see PM's boxout, p47]. The UltraGold is the first MoFi MC, and at £1499, it raises the brand's price point.

Working backward, with a £700 gap between this and its dearest MM, there's a hole which could be filled with a less-expensive MC, but that's just me thinking aloud. The UltraGold is so classy an offering at its price point that it probably won't be needed: once you hear it, you'll scratch around for the extra dosh. Yup, it's that good. Equally, there is nothing to stop MoFi from producing a model above it. UltraPlatinum, anyone?

MAGICAL MYSTERY?

There's no mystery to this, because MoFi's secret weapon, beyond manufacturing some of the finest sounding LPs ever pressed, is a wizard named Allen Perkins.



ABOVE: The outer dark grey body includes threaded holes for secure headshell mounting

His Spiral Groove turntables [HFN Jan '11] have always been ranked in the A-list and, among other innovations, have included a tonearm base inspired by interchangeable camera lens mounts.

With over 35 years in the hi-fi biz, Perkins is known for his fastidious approach and the UltraGold pick-up reflects this attention to detail. He's also a guitarist, so this MC is immediately identifiable as 'musical' rather than 'analytical'. Then there's his input into the UltraGold MC's rather deceptive styling.

Deception? Yup: you think it's gonna be a pain in the keister to install, but the naked cantilever (which usually makes me nervous), and that host of angles begging to be lined up, render this one of the easiest cartridges I've ever installed. And that includes slab-bodied pick-ups that defeat the benefits of parallel sides with barely visible styli. I suspect Allen and the MoFi guys must have mused that this shouldn't be compromised with operational quirks. I tried it with three different phono stages and every time it worked best with 100ohm loading. Moreover, the UltraGold sails through anything you subject it to at 2g...

BILL OF MATERIALS

Having spent too much time of late comparing different stylus profiles and cantilever materials, suffice it to say the UltraGold's recipe of nude Shibata stylus, boron cantilever, neodymium magnet and PC-OCC wiring could just as easily describe a cartridge costing £5000. And no seasoned audiophile would blink.



ABOVE: Viewed from the side, the UltraGold looks 'all angles' but the square top profile ensures alignment is far easier than expected

'The contrast was evocative of tubes vs transistors'

MoFi fitted this to an ultra-low resonance aluminium/brass extrusion. The body is threaded so there's no fiddling with nuts 'n' bolts and I had it mounted in seconds – literally. Blessed, too, are the widely-spaced, colour-coded pins, so there remains only one complaint to level at the UltraGold: getting it out of the box without it coming to grief.

For some reason, the ecologically minimalist box opens to reveal the UltraGold squeezed into a cut-out card aperture on a foam insert. There are no gaps around the cartridge to insert your fingers, so forcing it out with a blunt tool, without dislodging the stylus guard, aged me a year. MoFi, please take note.

FRISONS OF DELIGHT

Hand on heart, it was the only wrinkle in the set-up experience. Other than that, I found myself enjoying a flood of wholly unexpected frissons of sheer delight. Which is my prolix way of saying that I was playing LP after LP after LP, including the very

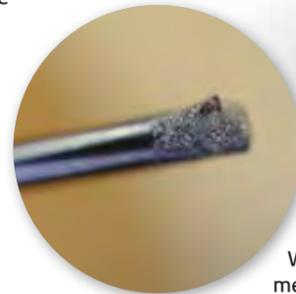
RIGHT: The MC mech, fixed neodymium magnet and permendur yoke are mounted into a two-part brass/alloy body. Exposed cantilever demands caution but cueing is a dream...

albums I suspect were used in tuning the UltraGold – a choice selection of MoFi One-Steps [HFN May '17].

If that was too obvious a path to follow, especially as it makes almost any cartridge sound better than it might when 99% of the LPs we play are normal pressings, I took the decision to at first listen only to regular releases. One of these was a 45rpm, 12in single: the Traveling Wilburys' extended version of the blissful 'Handle With Care' [Wilbury Records W7732T].

A feast of guitar sounds, I chose it for another reason: all the voices – Jeff Lynne, Roy Orbison, Bob Dylan, Tom Petty and George Harrison – are almost embarrassingly familiar to me having savoured them over a half-century. While distinguishing between them isn't as tough as trying to hear the difference between Zildjian and Paiste cymbals (percussionists tell me that's because I'm not a drummer), and you'd have to be hearing-impaired not to identify Dylan vs. Orbison, the UltraGold proved its worth by revealing the distinctive textures, breathing and phrasing with a facility I can only define as 'vivid'.

No, I don't know what microphones were used at the sessions, or even if the vocals were laid down in separate studios.



INSET: A Shibata (fine line) diamond is cemented to the end of a boron pipe cantilever

Whatever the case, the voices meshed with such mutual support, while maintaining each individual character, that I had to resist spinning more Everly Brothers, Beach Boys and Hollies albums just to test the repeatability of my experience. The UltraGold – whatever else may be said about its strengths, and they are numerous

– is midband-dominant, in a good way. Like the BBC LS3/5A and Radford tube amps, the UltraGold adores and cossets the human voice. Is there a price to pay for this? I guess it comes down to preference. The upper registers match the midband for authority and there's plenty of good ol' MC warmth, but I'm sure some listeners will prefer more slam at the extreme bottom end.

TUBES AND TRANNIES

I am not one of them, so this will have no influence on my verdict, but I must address it for you. Playing War's *Greatest Hits 2.0* [Far Out/Rhino R1 655988], where the absolute weight of the sound is crucial, I was reminded that MoFi's MMs have a touch more kick. The contrast was even more evocative of valves vs. solid-state. To put this aspect of the sound to bed, and to not let it colour the impression, I have no choice but to defer to the tube/transistor analogy, as divisive as it is. That's kinda like saying that if you are enamoured of MoFi's MM models, you might be confused by their much dearer sibling.

Which is a nonsense: it's more about presentation or character than absolute accuracy, and turning to War's heavier tracks proved no less rewarding than listening to the vocals-centric Wilburys track. The lower registers are actually (to my ears) more extended than via the MMs, which may be an illusion if I'm comparing the MM's drier, snappier sound to the MC's lushness, but – as I will forever maintain –

MOFI'S MOVING-MAGNETS

Launched in 2016, and also voiced by Spiral Groove founder Allen Perkins, the 'Trackers' are a trio of moving-magnet pick-ups bearing the MoFi moniker. Dubbed the StudioTracker, UltraTracker and MasterTracker (£199, £499 and £799, respectively) these bespoke MMs are built in Japan to MoFi's specification – a key feature being their 'V-Twin dual-magnet generator' that matches the layout of the cutting head in MoFi's lathes. The symmetry of that magnetic circuit is borne out in the matched L+R and L-R response and distortion traces of the MasterTracker [HFN Jul '19], usurping the UltraGold MC in this regard.

Otherwise, while the Tracker MMs and UltraGold MC are excellent, er, trackers the new MC has the edge here, as it does with its more extended high treble response. This, in large part, is down to the superior profile of the UltraGold's Shibata stylus, the enhanced rigidity of the boron cantilever and reduced moving mass of this ensemble and PC-OCC coils. The MasterTracker employs a similar Fine Line stylus but, like all the Trackers, it has a crimped alloy cantilever and slightly stiffer suspension (lower compliance) than the MC. While it's unusual for the MC in a family of pick-ups to have a higher compliance than its MM relatives, this does ensure the UltraGold will sail through the most violent of grooves without pause. It's also better suited to the popular medium effective mass tonearms from the likes of SME, Rega and Pro-Ject too. PM

CARTRIDGE

RIGHT: Part of the exposed MC mech with its PC-OCC wiring is visible here. It's partially protected/damped by a layer of fibre tape adhering to the underside

the ultimate deciding factor is your own personal preference.

I lied before: I couldn't stay away from The Beach Boys. The recent *Feel Flows* box [Capitol 02508 80212] provides one of the best-ever versions of *Surf's Up*, and here's where you can ignore any perplexity over UltraGold's vs. MoFi MMs' bottom octaves. That's because of the way the UltraGold handles the liquidity of the sonic effects which permeate the album. There's nothing punning about it, as the album is largely water-themed throughout. With 'Don't Go Near The Water' and 'Feel Flows', Brian Wilson uses this to remind us constantly that the LP has 'surf' in its title.

PRESSING THE PEDAL

It's rare that the *outré* adjectives which we've adopted over the decades to describe sound resemble a musical equivalent of a poet using onomatopoeia. I suppose 'dry' music should have been the basis for, say, the soundtrack to *Lawrence Of Arabia*, while you can come up with your own playlist for 'chocolate', 'plummy', *ad infinitum*.

Whatever adjectives the entire canon of hi-fi begs to use, one stands proud for the UltraGold and that is 'fluid'. It's not just the smooth conveying of liquidity in The Beach Boys album. It's the consistency in



the dynamic swings from soft to loud and back, the wholeness of the soundstage, the nature of the air around the instruments. Back to Beatle George and his world-changing solo, *All Things Must Pass 50th Anniversary* [Capitol 3567012] and I was forced to think of a sound quality appropriate to the meaning of 'Wah-Wah', rich as it is with that specific guitar gizmo's effect.

George was sparing with it, but the cartridge tracked the fluidity with such grace and consistency that I was driven to pull a U-turn and listen to a Mobile Fidelity LP, if not quite a One-Step. Out came the most adventurous use of wah-wah pedal in my experience – easily the equal of Jimi Hendrix's mastery of it – on Jeff Beck's *Truth* [MFSL 2-502], a 45rpm pressing on thick vinyl, which stomps my first pressing.

'I Ain't Superstitious' does for wah-wah what actress Sue Lyon did for lollipops... So the UltraGold MC followed every one of Beck's sinewy moves, and I just had to play it three times in a row. ☺



ABOVE: The gold-plated output pins are clearly colour-coded and well spaced to assist with headshell wiring

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

As we've said, who better than a record label to develop a cartridge? This is a hyper-modern take on classic MCs, retaining the virtues of warmth and air, but with trackability that had me looking for a 'V15' designation somewhere. (Youngsters: look it up...) Prices seem irrelevant in high-end hi-fi, when top cartridges exceed £15k, so the UltraGold, at one-tenth of that? Chalk up another MoFi bargain.

Sound Quality: 88%

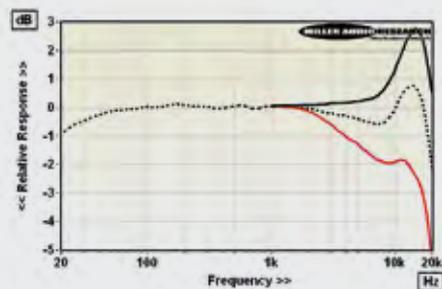


LAB REPORT

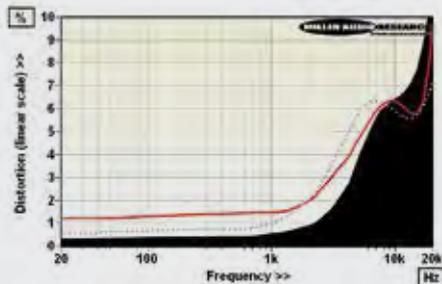
MOFI ULTRAGOLD

With a fairly standard tracking force range of 1.8-2.2g suggested for the UltraGold, I performed all my tests at 2.0g where this MC pick-up tracked like a high compliance moving-magnet, successfully navigating the 80µm groove while keeping hold of the top +18dB modulation (315Hz lateral cut, re. 11.2µm) at just 0.5% THD. Indeed, compliance is rather higher at 18/20cu (vertical/lateral) than MoFi's rated 10cu which, combined with the 7.3g bodyweight, indicates the UltraGold is better suited to low effective mass arms. Ironically, the high effective mass of the 10in alloy tonearm fitted to MoFi's own UltraDeck [HFN Jul '19] better suits its 'Tracker' range of MM pick-ups with their lower ~12cu compliance [see boxout, p47].

Output is a little over the rated 0.4mV at 452µV (re. 1kHz/5cm/sec), channel balance is within tolerance at 0.6dB while stereo separation is a perfectly 'good' 28dB/1kHz (falling to 14dB/20kHz). In most cases you'll be looking at selecting around +65dB gain on your MC phono preamp to optimise output level, S/N and input overload margin (headroom). Driving a >100ohm load, the UltraGold shows a very slight low bass roll-off of -0.9dB/20Hz but the rigid and lightweight boron cantilever, and near-ideal 21° VTA of the Shibata diamond, assists in delivering an extended HF response that rises to +0.8dB from 12-16kHz and achieves -1.7dB/20kHz (-4.6dB/20kHz, left channel). Distortion reflects the extended HF response [dashed trace, Graph 1], the unequalised figure amounting to just 1.9% at 1kHz/5cm/sec while the RIAA-equalised THD ranges from 0.4-1.1% (lateral), 1.5-9.7% (vertical) and 0.75-7.2% (stereo) [see Graph 2, below]. This is a well-sorted MC that tracks like a trooper... PM



ABOVE: Freq. resp. curves (-8dB re. 5cm/sec) lateral (L+R, black) vs. vertical (L-R, red) vs. stereo dashed



ABOVE: Lateral (L+R, black), vertical (L-R, red), stereo (dashed) tracing and generator distortion (2nd-4th harms) vs. freq. from 20Hz-20kHz (-8dB re. 5cm/sec)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Generator type/bodyweight	Moving-coil / 7.3g
Recommended tracking force	18-22mN (20mN)
Sensitivity/balance (re. 5cm/sec)	452µV / 0.6dB
Compliance (vertical/lateral)	18cu / 20cu
Vertical tracking angle	22 degrees
L/R Tracking ability	80µm / 80µm
L/R Distortion (-8dB, 20Hz-20kHz)	0.5-17% / 0.4-11%
L/R Frequency resp. (20Hz-20kHz)	+0.0 to -4.5dB / +1.2 to -1.7dB
Stereo separation (1kHz / 20kHz)	28dB / 14dB