

STANTON STR8-150

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With the number of turntables hitting the market these days, you'd think that garage bands have been replaced by bedroom DJs. The old adage "Everybody wants to be a DJ" has never been more true than it is now, and old-school jam sessions are rapidly giving way to 21st-century journeys by DJs in bedrooms around the world.

Although some who grew up playing in garage bands may chafe at the idea of DJs as musicians, you'd have to be blind not to notice the meteoric rise of vinyl jocks in the music industry. This new breed of artist is here to stay, and DJs have at least one undisputable trait in common with traditional axe grinders: an insatiable lust for hot new gear. Just a few years ago, when DJing was a fledgling science, many choices in gear were clear for DJs — but none was so crystal as which turntable to buy. It was hardly even a question: Technics SL-1200MK2 decks have been the standard since their introduction in 1978, and there's scarcely a club open in the civilized world that doesn't have at least one pair in the booth. Conventional wisdom said buy them; practice on them; you can't go wrong with the best.

At least, that's what everyone used to think. Manufacturers sniffing out profits in this burgeoning sector of the music industry flooded the market in the late 1990s with hundreds of new models. This made the deck-buying decision far more difficult for the average DJ. Technics 1200s were often terribly expensive in comparison to these new turntables, but they managed to easily hold their own against early knockoffs by manufacturers like Numark, Vestax and Stanton. It didn't take long for those latecomers to get their ducks in a row, though, and now Stanton has upped the ante for pro DJs with the introduction of the STR8-150. This baby sports all of the basics of the classic 1200 along with a grip of nifty extras, and although Stanton's new flagship turntable probably won't defeat the inertia that's kept Technics at the top of the heap for years, **it trumps the SL-1200 in just about every department.**

THE FIRST SPIN

One of the most telling factors about a turntable's quality is weight. A heavy, solid turntable is generally more resistant to feedback and offers durability in the less-than-optimal conditions that usually exist in nightclubs (and many aspiring DJs' bedrooms). The STR8-150 tips the scales at a hefty 36 pounds — a full 10 pounds heavier than the Technics SL-1200M3D. With that kind of weight, you won't want to haul this deck around too much, but I was left with the feeling that if it were used in a mobile situation, its solid construction would hold up beautifully.

The turntable's all-steel construction is clad in a sleek graphite-gray enamel, and all of the LEDs are that cool, deep blue that's becoming popular on gear these days. The tonearm is straight, a feature that reduces skipping during scratching and back cueing. I was a bit disappointed to find that the STR8-150's tonearm is fixed and can't be swapped for an S-shape tonearm. However,

Stanton does offer the ST-150, which has essentially the same guts as the STR8-150 with an S-shape tonearm attached.

The STR8-150's rear panel sports a wide range of connectors that are rarely seen on the average turntable. As expected, a pair of standard RCA phono outputs is provided for basic connectivity to DJ mixers. But the similarities end there: Also included are a pair of RCA line outputs for connection to inputs that don't have phono preamps, as well as a S/PDIF jack for hooking up the deck to digital mixers or directly into digital recording devices like DAT players and computer soundcards. A switch between the phono and line outputs selects which output is active. There's also a power switch on the back panel; this is a bit of a departure from the top-mounted rotary on/off switches on other decks. All of the STR8-150's cables, including the power cable, are removable and replaceable — a major improvement upon fixed cables.

Included in the box along with the turntable is one slipmat and a bag containing the detachable power cord, RCA audio cables and a removable target light. I was pleasantly surprised to find a 680HP cartridge in there, too. The box literally contains everything you need — sans mixer — to get up and running right away.

TO NEARM GEOGRAPHY

Anyone familiar with the average DJ turntable will immediately feel at home with the STR8-150. Standard features are located in their usual positions: pitch control at the far right, platter speed and start/stop on the left and a target light to the bottom right of the platter to provide stylus illumination. The similarities end there, though, and that's where the fun begins.

The STR8-150 sports three extra buttons and two tiny dials at the bottom right that control pitch range, key correction, platter reverse and platter start/brake time. The usual round on/off switch present on other decks is here on the STR8-150, as well, but on this unit, it's solely used to control the motor. Switching this off won't kill the deck — a good thing because the STR8-150's line output requires constant power — rather, it simply turns off the motor, allowing the platter to spin down naturally.

Scratch artists will be pleased to find a second platter Start/Stop button located at the top left of the STR8-150. Club DJs probably won't get much use out of this, but it's perfect for battle setups, as the button is at a far more accessible location when rotated 90 degrees to battle style.

The buttons are all logically placed and well-spaced. I occasionally brushed over them with my wrist while riding the pitch control, but I never inadvertently triggered one, and before long, I was accustomed to their location. The two dials for start and brake times are a little small and difficult to manipulate on the fly, but the fact that this parameter can be accessed quickly from the front panel and not through some digital display is a bonus in itself.

READY TO PLAY

Hooking up the STR8-150 was simple, perhaps even more so than with other turntables. There's not much to do: Plug in the power, connect the outputs and go. The turntable is self-grounding,

so there's no flimsy ground wire to fumble with. This is great in principle because those ground wires tend to clutter things and seem to get chewed up awfully easily, but you'll have to take care where you plug in the STR8-150. When I first set up the turntable, I connected the power to a different circuit than my mixer and was greeted with a nasty hum. Bummer! For days, I thought I'd have to send the deck back, but I experimented a bit more and found that the hum disappeared when I plugged it in to the same outlet as my mixer. That's not a big deal, but something to be aware of when planning your setup — and something that could have been resolved with a simple ground wire.

Aside from that minor issue, **the STR8-150 is an absolute pleasure to use.** The turntable boasts one of the most powerful motors in the industry, spitting out a whopping 4.5 kg of torque per centimeter. What does this mean to you? It means that this table has raw power under the hood — it starts and stops on a dime, and the platter's speed is far more resistant to finger pressure than other turntables. Speeding up and slowing down the platter manually takes a little more effort than with a 1200, and the platter snaps back to speed rapidly. **I found that this quick response enabled me to be more detailed and accurate with my mixes.** This deck is so powerful, you can stop the platter with your finger, release it and then watch it zip back to full speed immediately — **incredible.** Sonically, the deck is clean, and I wasn't able to detect any noticeable difference between the sound quality from the line and phono outputs. **The signal path is top-notch throughout.**

SKIP RESISTANCE

The sheer power and control offered by the platter is a boon for scratch DJs, but add the virtually skip-proof straight tonearm, and **you have a dream machine for jocks who like to handle their vinyl.** Having used and abused this turntable for nearly a month with heavy and lightweight vinyl, I can safely say that short of knocking it over, **the deck is nearly skip-proof.** Of course, there are always extenuating circumstances that can cause skippage — groove damage, unstable surfaces, warped records and so on Ñ but when it comes to scratching, **the STR8-150 took everything I could throw at it like a champ and asked for seconds.**

The STR8-150's skip resistance is particularly noteworthy to scratch DJs who add extra weight to their headshells. Although that extra stylus pressure certainly does help keep the needle in the groove, it also drastically increases cue burn and wears out records quickly. The STR8-150's straight tonearm goes a long way toward helping to alleviate this problem. Even with the needle set to the manufacturer's lightest recommended tracking weight, I was still hard-pressed to skip it under even the most demanding circumstances. This is good news for your favorite records!

BONUS FEATURES

As a club DJ, I didn't find myself using the STR8-150's extra features too extensively; nonetheless, I was happy to have the tools there. The adjustable start and brake times were particularly fun to play with. Each can be set between 0.2 and 6 seconds, offering lightning-fast response at the bottom of its range and slow, smooth pitch bends at the top. They are both analog controls, so figuring out exactly how to dial in the right sound takes a little practice, but it didn't take me long to work both into my mixing.

The key-correction facility is showing up more and more on modern turntables. It's a bit of a misnomer — it doesn't really correct anything at all; rather, it just keeps the pitch of the record constant while adjusting the tempo. The pro-audio world calls this time compression/expansion or time stretching. The basic concept is chopping audio into thousands of little pieces and moving them closer together or farther apart, depending on whether the tempo is increasing or decreasing. This is tricky business, and it's hard to do well, so it's no surprise that the time stretching in the STR8-150 isn't exactly world-class. It's passable when working with pitch ranges of ± 3 percent or so, but when I pushed it beyond that, the timing of tracks became unstable and the result was unmusical. The coolest way to use key correction is as an effect: Set the pitch control to ± 50 percent, and kick the pitch all the way down for some interesting sounds.

The other features are nice additions to a DJ's arsenal of effects. The Reverse switch does exactly that, toggling the direction of the platter in about a third of a second. A 78 rpm mode can be accessed by depressing the 33 and 45 buttons together, which is perfect if you're keen on dropping any vintage Johnny Cash in your set or when $+50$ percent at 33 or 45 rpm just isn't enough!

CLOSING TIME

The STR8-150 is a sweet deck, but is it worth the eye-popping \$999 list price? That, of course, is up to you. Luckily, however, street prices have been clocking in at a little less than half that, which puts it directly in competition with the Technics SL-1200 series. If you can score one for that price, you'll be getting a turntable with superior features for a comparable price.

As a die-hard 1200 user, I really wanted to find fault with the STR8-150, **but there just isn't much about the unit to dislike.** It has a few annoying quirks, like the lack of a ground wire and no dust cover, but neither affects the performance of **this rock-solid workhorse. The sound quality is great; the construction is top-quality through and through; and it takes virtually an act of God to skip the tonearm. The multitude of benefits offered by the STR8-150 makes it a superior choice for professional DJs and club installations alike. If you demand nothing but the best and can afford top-of-the-line gear, the STR8-150 fits the bill and won't disappoint.**

Product Summary STANTON STR8-150

Pros: Solid construction. Virtually skip-proof. Powerful high-torque motor. Adjustable start/brake times. Three selectable pitch ranges as high as ± 50 percent. Phono, line and S/PDIF digital outputs. Reverse button. 680HP cartridge included.

Cons: Fixed tonearm. No ground wire. Time-compression algorithm a bit sketchy. No dust cover.