

Finally it's time for me to write up my thoughts on the Trans-Fi Salvation rim-drive record deck, having been a beta-tester for the deck. Salvation is available in 2 forms, both come with the T3Pro arm included, the variance is down to the platter; for £1,800 you get the entry-level acrylic platter, £2,400 you get a monster 9kg aluminium platter.



Trans-Fi products are no-nonsense. Boris Johnson, London's mayor, would no doubt say there's a complete lack of flimflam. Vic is Mr Trans-Fi; his philosophy is to build affordable high-performance products to a necessary and good level of engineering but he avoids turning his products into audiophile jewellery. Solid engineering based on performance-based principals is the mantra.

As both a designer and seller he is able to take his products to market without adding distributor and dealers margins or even VAT, at least for now, but sales of the deck may change the VAT situation, so if you want one don't delay! Vic is an enthusiast who like most of us is searching for ways to produce the best sound. He designs and then initially tests his ideas out with parts he makes in his home workshop. When it's time to make production parts they are outsourced to local machine shops, to be made in batches of 10 or 20 on CNC machines. The machine shops have varying demands placed on them so fighting to get parts delivered in time is a constant battle. When the parts are ready arms and decks are then checked and assembled personally in his workshop. You should not expect a new Salvation to be available from stock; this is a build-to-order item. Depending on the batch production cycle your order could take a few weeks to be fulfilled or you could be lucky and take delivery very quickly. If Salvation were available from dealer stock and all the additional margins added this £2,400 record deck would more likely cost in the region of £5,000 to £6,000. It would still be good value but I for one am very pleased that Vic chooses to avoid this route.

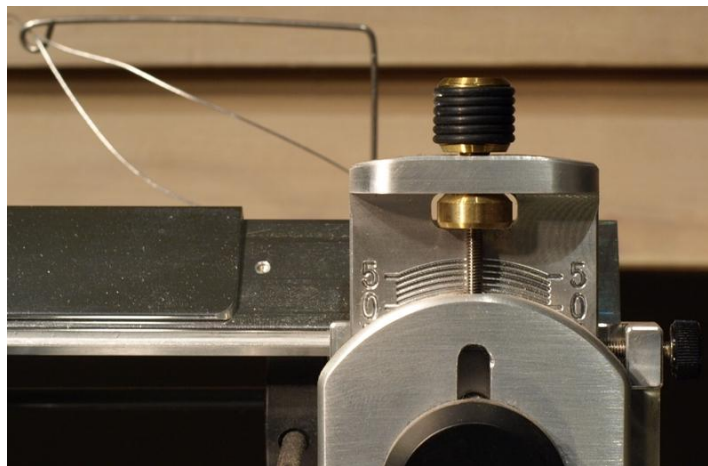
If you visit <http://www.trans-fi.com/turntable.htm> you will get a flavour for the journey involved in producing the Salvation record deck. He has used Garrards, Lencos & Michells to name but a few, he has then modified them and improved them. He's gained a fantastic knowledge of what works and what doesn't. Rather than improve existing decks he found he finally had to bite the bullet and produce an entire new deck to achieve the level of performance he was aiming for. Every aspect is critical for performance and deciding on how to manage the power for the motor is probably one of the most critical along with the characteristics of motor chosen for the deck. Ultimately a lack of digital or feedback control in the power supply was found to give clear sonic advantages.

Previously I've reviewed the Trans-Fi air-bearing arm at [www.enjoythemusic.com](http://www.enjoythemusic.com). The arm has since evolved into the T3Pro. Most developments are evolutionary and can be fitted as upgrades. Vic will not stand still, instead choosing to constantly refine his designs, though the T3Pro arm and Salvation record deck have probably reached the point where further evolutions will now be relatively rare. Then again he always has the ability to surprise me with his inventiveness so keep tabs on what he's doing!

T3Pro arm with Tomahawk wand and London Reference cartridge:



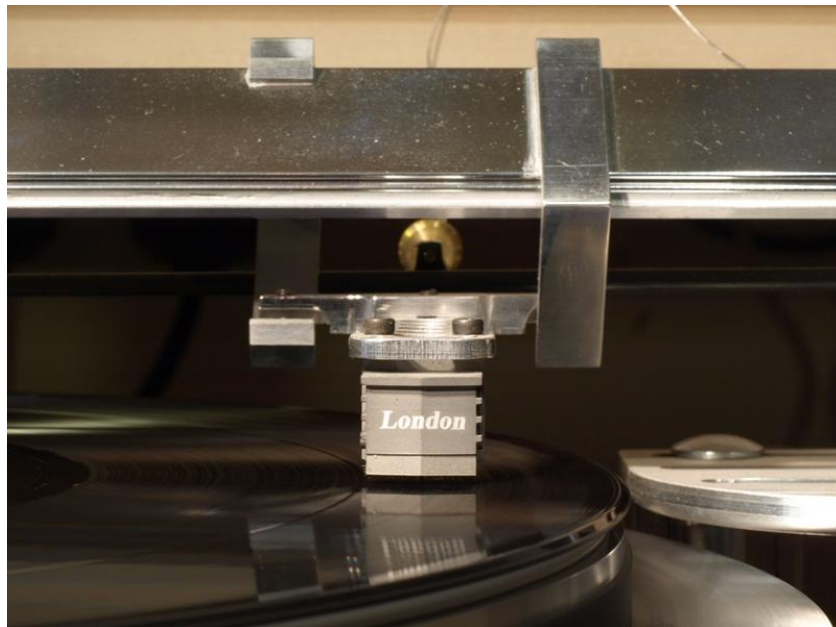
On-the-fly VTA adjustment on the T3 Pro arm:



I've been in the highly privileged position of being a beta-tester for the Salvation deck for over a year. A record deck may have relatively few parts but all these parts have to work in harmony and sympathy with each other, believe me when I say that Vic obsesses about getting details right.

Your Salvation will arrive in a flight case which will be picked up by courier once you have your deck up and running. As ever, Vic has thought through the challenges of shipping a fragile product, slate believe me is very easy to break in transit. Investing in flight cases for shipping is an excellent way to achieve maximal protection and at the same time avoiding expensive packaging which the owner will most likely have to dispose of. You can find a picture of the flight case at <http://www.trans-fi.com/salvationmanual.htm>.

Salvation sits on a slate plinth supported by 3 adjustable large spiked legs planted on aluminium feet. The bearing mounting is set into the slate plinth, the inverted bearing features a ceramic ball acting on a Lignum Vitae thrust plate. Lignum Vitae is a magical material, not only is it incredibly dense, it's also self lubricating. Uses for Lignum Vitae include lawn bowls (as in balls), clock mechanics, ship propeller bearings and even police truncheons. Having tried a number of thrust pad materials I can say that I found Lignum Vitae to be the best, the difference in bass performance between various materials was surprisingly easy to discern. This brings me on to an aspect of the deck I noticed from the outset; a lack of what is often mistakenly called "vinyl roar" which is typically "bearing roar". With the stylus in an unmodulated rotating groove the lack of roar is very welcome and impressive.



There are two platter options for Salvation, there's a 12 inch acrylic platter and a 14 inch stepped platter weighing in at 9kg. Both platters are rim-driven from a free standing motor pod. The motor pod is engaged via a lever with the driving wheel acting on a rubber traction band around the platter. The motor drive is very direct, quite unlike a belt drive deck and it's more direct than Garrard idler drives too. The removal of lossy isolation of the motor requires an extremely well sorted drive system and an especially well developed power supply. Take it from me; it's a cinch to hear VERY minor changes to the power supply.

For much of the development period Salvation used a 38mm drive wheel, speed change (33 / 45) was achieved by increasing the voltage supplied to the motor. The original Drive Wheel (DW) used an O-ring which was impossible to reduce in size due to noise intrusion. Speed drift was one of the consequences, but recently, experimentation with a new drive wheel system allowed a much smaller diameter to be used which resulted in increased motor torque without increasing the noise, and banished speed drift. Different sized drive wheels were tested. It was found that one particular voltage (+/- a couple of volts) was optimal for sound. I measured the startup time for the 9kg platter; 0 to 33.33 in less than 4 seconds! That's quick for a 9kg platter...that motor is producing a lot of torque. To change speed now you simply swap drive wheels, 33, 45 and 78 are included. On first hearing the sonic upgrade was immediately obvious but more on the sound of the deck later.



Vic's goal is that sound quality is the most important aspect. If there are small consequential foibles the deck owner must get used to then so be it. The power supply has been an area where much time has been spent checking out many alternatives. An initially tempting power supply with motor that includes feedback speed control resulted in

rock solid speed stability but it was let down by rumble transmitted to the platter and a strong hum from the controller. Close but no cigar.

A simpler controller with compensation for stylus drag was trialled, whilst this was impressive in resisting pressures even from record cleaning brushes, in the final analysis the sound was spoiled by a smearing of bass notes as the power supply made micro-adjustments to the voltage driving the motor. Simple lead-acid supplies were tested with regulators to govern voltage from the discharging battery. It was soon found that mains powered regulators outperformed the battery once the regulators were suitably configured. So what we have on the production Salvation is a linear power supply with multiple cascaded regulators with some extra tweaks that proved to be very important. Cascaded regulators are used to massively filter out mains borne noise helping to ensure the deck performs well at any time of day. Mains power can vary in quality hugely so rejection of noise by the power supply is very important with such a direct drive of the platter.

What is also important to realise is that the power supply purposely makes no attempt to control platter speed other than by supplying a constant voltage. There is no compensation for stylus drag or temperature.....nor was this found to be necessary. The torque of the motor is sufficient to withstand stylus drag & speed settles relatively quickly from the start. A slight tweak may be necessary as the components settle, but other than that, its plug & play. Speed does not vary or waiver over short timescales so piano notes for example do not wow.

The lack of feedback control for the power supply is a very deliberate design decision which results in improved sound quality. If you are someone who must have a deck which is instantly up to 33.33rpm at switch on and never ever varies from this then I suggest you need a direct drive deck such as a Technics SP10 or 1210. If you value sound quality and can live with making occasional slight speed setting tweaks then consider Salvation. This is "straight-through" analogue with no digital control or feedback mechanisms.

Some final words on the two platter options; the 9kg platter permits the motor to spin a little faster so producing some useful extra torque. Speed is maintained a little more consistently too as it takes a lot of force to change the speed of a 9kg platter. Any speed drift, even with the acrylic platter, is perfectly acceptable to me and I regard myself slightly on the obsessive side of sane. Vic has measured speed drift with the acrylic platter to be less than the broadcast standard of 0.3%. The heavy aluminium platter betters 0.1%. In terms of sound both platters sound great. For the aluminium platter a mat was required, we tried many mats, mats are very deck dependant so simply picking a mat you know to have worked well on another deck doesn't mean a jot. In the end acrylic was found to be best, which is interesting and justifies why the acrylic platter also sounds great.

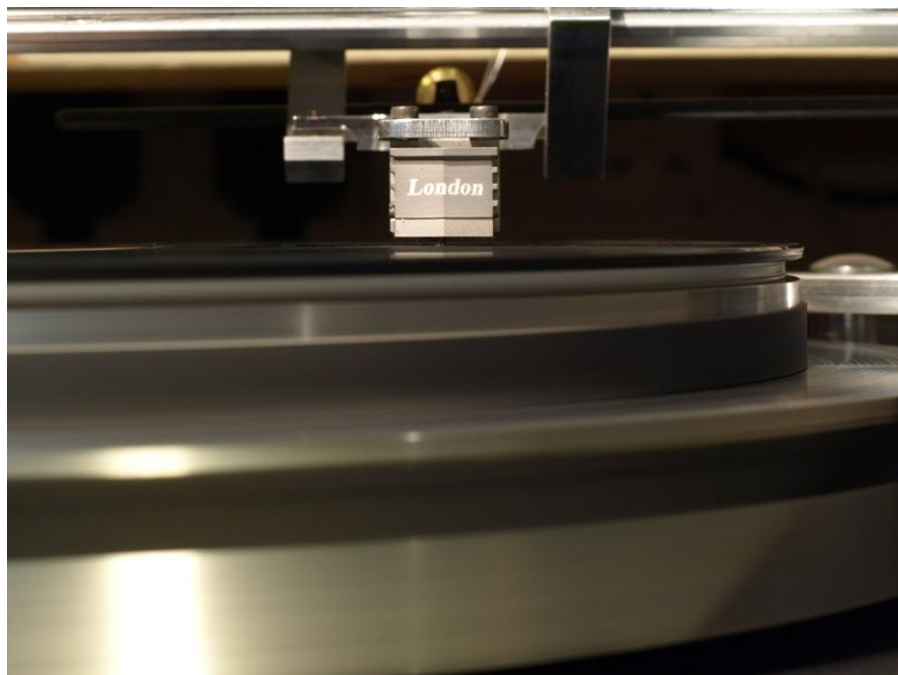
In attempting to describe how Salvation sounds I will contrast it to my Garrard 301 which is mounted in a twin tier plinth armed with an Origin Live Encounter mkIII. I have also used T3Pro on the 301. First up I have to say that the 301 is a fabulous deck, I love the looks and operation. I also love the drive and power of this idler drive deck. The 301 of course has many committed followers, I hope I won't upset too many when I say it's not the most neutral sounding deck. Its colourations are generally very benign but they exist even with a good plinth such as mine. I've managed to ameliorate most of the colouration by voicing my Hagerman Cornet 2 phono stage for use with the 301. What I've done is to choose a combination of tubes and capacitors which result in a slightly lean bass and emphasized treble, this compensates for the tonal foibles of the 301. My 301 used in this way is a very nice deck indeed, you have to go a long way to improve on the 301 sound. As a point of reference my 301, arm and plinth would cost £2,000 to £2,500 so price-wise it's in the same league as the Salvation. A 301 needing restoration and using a high-end plinth maker you could stretch the cost for a complete 301 deck to over £3,000.

My Garrard 301 with Encounter mkIII arm:



OK, down to brass tacks. The very first early development version of Salvation I received amazingly clearly out-classed my beloved 301. Particular strengths noted at this early stage of development were incredible dynamics usually associated with idlers and a precision I associate with direct drives, pretty amazing. Vic has continually developed the deck over the last year to the point where it is now in production form. As you can imagine Salvation in production form now out-classes my 301 even more considerably. Worryingly so but don't tell anyone, I want 301 values to increase, not decrease! Just as the T3Pro is one of the world's great arms and a hi-fi enthusiast bargain, equally so is the Salvation record deck. It's actually quite hard to characterise a deck that simply gets the sound so right. The first word that comes to mind was "tight" in that there's incredible control at play here. There is no apparent character from the deck, detail and clarity are superb. Soundstage and imaging are wide and deep, the separation between instruments is excellent. Bass is thunderous when it's there in the recording. Dynamics are however the first thing that hits you, so to speak. My London (Decca) cartridges play their part here but the deck has to allow them to shine, and it does. Recording quality is very easy to hear, poor recordings are listenable but put on a great recording, often from the 50s or 60s, and you are rewarded big-time!

My Reference tracking on the 14 inch 9kg Salvation stepped platter:



I'm not going to do the typical reviewer thing of reeling off how various records sound, this can be so system and room dependant that I don't feel it's particularly useful. A comparison to my Garrard 301 is probably more useful and for sure it's the best comparison I have as the decks are side-by-side. You maybe aware that Garrards such as

my 301 are highly regarded for their dynamics, and rightly so. Salvation takes on the 301, competes and leaves the 301 trailing its wake, especially so in terms of dynamics. If you listen to my 301 you'll think, that is a great sound. Then you move onto Salvation, you'll be shocked at just how much better in every aspect it is. Aside from bass power, extension, timing, mid-range clarity, treble clarity, soundstage, imaging, macro and micro dynamics, Salvation simply has a depth to its sound; it makes music a more meaningful performance.

How can I describe the Trans-Fi Salvation succinctly? **It's Alive!**



## **Review System Context**

### **Cartridges**

London Reference  
London Jubilee  
Ortofon Kontrapunkt B  
ZTX R100H

### **Phono Stages**

Ray Samuels F-117 Nighthawk  
ECC83 with CCS / ECC88 with CCS, diy design  
Hagerman Cornet 2  
S&B TX-103 Step Ups  
Hagerman Piccolo

### **Preamps**

Tram mk2 DHT  
S&B TX-102 Transformer Volume Control

### **Power Amps**

LD91 (300B SE)

### **Speakers**

Bastanis Mandala Atlas with Chrystal drivers  
Bastanis Mandala 18 inch dipole basses with XTZ Sub Amp 1 DSP amplification