

Funk Firm Houdini decoupler

by Alan Sircom

There will be two types of people who make noise about the Funk Firm Houdini; those who come up with a score of objections, and those who have tried it. That's the thing about the modern audio world, and in particular the modern state of the vinyl art – put two people in a room and ask them a question about vinyl replay, and you'll get five completely conflicting viewpoints—most based on hearsay and a lot of assumption.

If we lived in a sane world, the Houdini would sweep away those assumptions no matter how well-composted they are. Funk describes the Houdini as a 'decoupler with high dynamic stability' with suspension system and a patented 'tortion-tether'. What you receive is a well-made 6mm high Manta Ray-shaped 'spacer'. Closer investigation shows this spacer to be built a little bit like a tiny and inverted suspended turntable, with the rigid plinth attached to the arm and the suspended part connecting to the cartridge. As a consequence, the Houdini is supplied with four Delrin mounting bolts; two to mount the cartridge to the Houdini and two more to mount the Houdini+cartridge to the arm itself. You will need to compensate for the marginal increase in the mass of the cartridge and the change to the VTA/SRA it produces. For the most part, I used a VPI MW-12 Fatboy gimbaled arm on a VPI HW-40 turntable, with the surprisingly excellent EAT Jo No 5 cartridge.

Most tonearms have a resonance of some sort (usually relatively mild, but ever-present), which often adds a bit of fake warmth to the upper bass or fake 'chime-y' zing to the upper registers. This takes that away. Some try to do this by adding a squidgy interface between arm and cartridge. While



such devices purport to eliminate these stray resonances, they more accurately shift the goalposts and push that resonance up or down the frequency band to less sonically harmful places. Houdini replaces 'squidgy' with 'suspension', and the result is incapable of singing along with the music, meaning the cartridge acts sonically independently of the arm. How this sounds mostly depends on the cartridge, but for the first time (for most people), they will be hearing their cartridge denuded of the arm's malign sonic influence. The arm becomes primarily a transporter of the cartridge, rather than a co-conspirator in its sound. This has been one of Funk Firm's goals for many years, and the reason it makes arms.

Funk Firm makes some of the least 'tone' of 'tonearms' money can buy, but not everyone has – or is capable of using – one of Funk's arms. In which case, the Houdini levels the playing field. We have become so used to the dull clang of most arms, that we accommodate it as part of vinyl's 'charm'. However, less than a minute into listening to what vinyl can sound like when that ringing, clanging, clanking sound of the ▶

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- ▶ arm is removed is an epiphany. Sounds are so much more vibrant and alive, so much more natural and realistic. This doesn't mean the sound of a Houdini'd turntable loses its character or becomes more like CD; it's paring back the sound an LP was always capable of making if we'd not cemented ourselves into silo thinking about how vinyl 'sounds'.

Here's a perfect case in point; Cannonball Adderley's epic *Somethin' Else* LP [Blue Note]. I've long enjoyed this album and have it in several forms, and always feel the LP versions show off that effortlessly warm, encompassing, musically satisfying sound many associate with vinyl replay. Here, that warmth is not attenuated, but it comes with additional layers of energy, of the interplay between players and of those micro-dynamic cues that puts you ever closer to the musicians. While these were able to be discerned in most arms, you don't need to put in the work with the same arms+Houdini.

That information is not half-buried beneath the intrinsic tone of the tonearm.

I'd like to argue – in the interest of fairness – that there will be people who actually like the intrusion of their tonearm on the sound of the cartridge. But I just can't. I can't see a way back from using the Houdini. It would be like saying, "Driving around in a new Ferrari is lovely, but I still prefer the Wartburg."

Curiously, even the Houdini's price works in its favour. It acts as a kind of self-selection process. No-one is realistically going to put a £300 Houdini on a £60 Crossley! However, there are also some stunning mid-to-high-end moving magnets that more than benefit from the Houdini's magic skills. Partner one of the better Audio-Technica MMs and you have a cartridge that is better than most un-Houdini'd MCs this side of £1.5k. And good moving coils benefit too. The odd thing about vinyl people, however, is they might see £300 for a Houdini and hesitate, yet happily spend hundreds on instead of a headshell and thousands on a more exotic body covering the same cartridge. As I said, if we lived in a sane world, people would judge devices on what they bring to the system and what they do to the music, rather than merely rattling some jewellery and thinking they bought better.

The Funk Firm Houdini is the best-named device in vinyl replay, as it makes the arm 'disappear... like magic'. Of course, like Harry Houdini, it isn't 'magic' just some very well applied practical science. It's strange that an entertainment system that predates electricity still has its 'well... duh!' moments (you might expect most of those to have happened decades ago). Still, the Houdini makes changes to the musical performance of a turntable system so bleedin' obvious, it's a wonder no one thought of it before. That, I guess, is one of the things Arthur Khoubesserian is so good at; looking at vinyl replay in a way no one has before! +

PRICE AND CONTACT DETAILS

Price: £300

Manufacturer: The Funk Firm

URL: thefunkfirm.co.uk