



ROUND TABLE

A decade or so after the passing of its founder, JA Michell Engineering Ltd. is still spinning. **David Price** visits this venerable family-run business

When its founder John Michell passed away 12 years ago, many in the hi-fi industry feared that Michell Engineering wouldn't be able to survive the loss of this uniquely talented man. However, the family business rallied round, resisted invitations to sell up, and put John's son-in-law Steve Rowland into the hot seat. Since then, the vinyl revival has given the company a new lease of life, new markets, and – finally – a new product. I spoke to Steve, and his son-in-law Jonathan Nye, in the office of Michell's venerable Borehamwood factory.

DP: How long has Michell Engineering been making turntables now?

SR: 44 years. Things kicked off in 1972 a proper. John always used to say we are the longest-established turntable maker in the United Kingdom, so yeah, I think we are the oldest. Of course, John was making things before this, right back to the mid-sixties, but Michell Engineering as is, is effectively 45 years old next birthday.

What, if anything, will you be remembered for years from now?

SR: Oh well, if it all finished tomorrow then the GyroDec would be what we'd be known for, certainly. We still list our serial numbers in a book and for the first couple of years from its launch in 1981, there was a huge number of decks that left this place. It was just before the advent of CD, and right at the peak of the

vinyl boom. Then you start to see it slow down a bit. Funnily enough we're undergoing something of a resurgence now. We make between 550 and 600 decks every year. By Rega standards that's peanuts – I've been there when they've had 800 decks go out on a pallet to one customer, so they're doing more in one shipment than we do in a year! But that's not what we're about – we've been steady.

How does it feel to be a turntable manufacturer in the 21st century?

SR: Well, we speak to so many people who say that they have got rid of all of their LPs – and it's the worst thing they've ever done. They really regret that. There is something very sociable about playing vinyl. Especially if you have a big collection that you haven't played for a while. It takes you back too, "do you remember that?". There is definitely something about it other than the sound, which is of course superb.

The high watermark for vinyl was the mid-seventies. We had all these great rock artists, everything from Pink Floyd to The Who and The Stones. Recording and production quality got really good and many bands started making great-sounding albums. I guess many folk of a certain age got into music at that time...

SR: Well yes, that's something that we are very well aware of – our customer base is still

predominately middle aged, not least because of the price points of Michell turntables. I suppose we don't have a product for the kids like Pro-Ject or Rega do. We can't compete with that, it's never ever going to happen. But like I said earlier, we do find that young people are growing up and leaving home and taking their existing deck with them, whatever it is. And then we are picking up sales of the GyroDec as a follow on from that. We get a lot of people at shows that just stand and stare. I say: "Can I help you?" and they reply: "I've always wanted one of these..."

Why do you think that is?

SR: We are lucky that most people tend to have their turntables in their lounge. They don't have the luxury of a special listening room where it doesn't matter what it looks like – so it becomes a piece of furniture. Of course, the Gyro is a pretty deck, and is easy to sell on that basis alone. Indeed, lots of shops put them in the window and just leave them turning, and it attracts passers by! It has almost become a kind of visual 'trademark'.

To me, the styling of the deck is a bit like a seventies supercar – it's so crisp and functional that it just hasn't dated. Think of the original Lamborghini Countach or Ferrari Daytona, it's just as beautiful a shape now as it was 35 years ago...

SR: Well I always think that it's a bit like a Porsche 911, because if you took a deck that



John Michell's parting shot was the TecnoArm tonearm

Matching it was the TecnoDec, which was effectively a stripped-down GyroDec SE

we've made today and you put it next to one that we've got upstairs which is that first one, and step back, they look the same. But they are completely different beasts. There is nothing on the deck other than the acrylic that hasn't changed. Go back 35 years and it was such an incredible design that it still stands shoulder to shoulder with what's out there now. There is a huge amount of engineering and substance to what you are buying.

It must be expensive to produce – compared with some rivals isn't it quite complex?

SR: Lots of people say to us that we are selling it too cheaply. When it came out in 1981, it cost a good deal more than the Linn LP12. Now it's completely the opposite way round. The standard GyroDec is £1,770 and the SE version is £1,356. We're able to keep the price low because all the material prices have levelled out – there was a time not so long ago when that wasn't the case. We're lucky that John left us with a great deck. Apart from a few cosmetic tweaks that people seem to like, we haven't had a new product, but we're making up for this by opening up new markets.

I suppose it's a bit like Morgan, in that respect...

SR: Ha, well if Sir John Harvey-Jones had come here, he would have got a shock! He went to Morgan and they completely ignored everything that he suggested – and that's a very good analogy in that we are very similar in the way that we do things. If we increased our sales by a substantial amount then we'd probably have to change the way we work completely, and that's not for me.



Punky, one of Michell's longest serving workers

How many GyroDecs have you made, up to now?

SR: Just short of 8,200 – and 4,550 Spyder Editions. Not huge amounts by any stretch of the imagination! I think we've done around 500 full Orbes and 1,300 TecnoDecs. Strangely, the latter has never really taken off – despite it being a great little turntable in its own right. It's basically a Gyro minus the fancy stuff – it shares the bearing, Gyro motor in a solid machined billet for the housing and has the Gyro platter without the weights – but is too closely priced (£733) for people not to

"Everything was done 'on the back of a fag packet' and then he'd actually make it"

want to save up for the real deal. We do have people who buy a TecnoDec, TecnoArm and HR power supply, but I just tell people to forget it, and buy the GyroDec!

Was it difficult, taking over from John, a decade or so ago?

SR: It was a challenge! I had only been working at Michell Engineering for 10 months, and everyone who was here had been here forever. John's brother-in-law worked here and the boys had all been here for 30 years. When we said that we need to do this or that, then everyone had this blank look on their face and said "John always did that, he didn't let anyone else do that job!" There were lots of things. If you look at the bearing case on the Gyro where the spindle comes through, there is a tiny lip internally around the top edge that is quite difficult to machine. I asked one day why that lip was



Decks regularly come home for servicing

there because it doesn't stop the oil coming out – if you overfill it, it will overflow anyway. We still don't know now, but put it on because that is how he designed it! He was a total perfectionist.

When I first met him, I got the sense that he wanted to produce a perfectly finished Meccano kit, so you could take any bit off in any way and it would be just right...

SR: Yes indeed, and the problem (if you can call it that) was that he tried to put that into everything he did – even when he was really ill, the amount of effort he took in getting the patio on our house right was crazy. He was a fussy bugger, to say the least! And although he was an incredibly clever guy, he did have a lot of time for people and was very approachable. He used to come home from shows with no voice where he had been talking too much.

JN: Probably one of the reasons he didn't want to go mass produced, is that you couldn't keep control – and he was a control freak, no doubt about that...

SR: The thing with John was that he'd think of an idea, then get up at the crack of sparrow, drive in here and make it. That was the thing, everything was done 'on the back of a fag packet' and then he'd actually make it and make sure it did what he wanted it to – there's a bag somewhere with all sorts of bits and pieces made by him. He didn't like the day-to-day, all the bits of paper that come with running a company – which is why I was originally asked to join Michell Engineering. We've got seven people working for us now, and it's a real family affair.

JN: Interestingly, I had previously worked as project manager for a company that did home automation and home cinema. Most of the team were salesmen who went out to get business, but here it is all incoming – the phone is ringing all the time!

Would you say he was one of the great eccentric English inventors?

SR: Well, he did have a shed in the back of his garden, but he was no mad scientist. He didn't see much of his kids, they were in bed when he got home back in the sixties, and he was gone when they got up. It was his life, his baby. He worked every hour God sent. He would always go home, have his dinner and come back. Just couldn't help himself. ▶



Just another normal Tuesday afternoon...

THE MICHELL STORY

WHERE DOES THE OBJECT of beauty that is Michell's GyroDec get made? The company's Borehamwood factory is no oil painting, far from it – indeed it's very much a working manufacturing premises that has evolved with no glitz or glamour. There's no fancy reception area, no designer coffee machine, or gourmet staff canteen. Instead, it's an old building full of vintage lathes and modern machines, plus the other assorted devices that make Michell turntables. It has hardly changed since I first visited in 1995. Newcomers are instantly disappointed, because it is most certainly not like stepping on to a sci-fi film set. It's a whole lot less auspicious than the Linn, SME or Avid factories for example, but think of it this way – with lower overheads, more of the price tag goes into the products themselves.

The company is very much a 'what you see is what you get' affair, with no fancy hyperbole

Works manager Steve Rowland joined 10 months before John Michell passed away in October 2003. He soon found himself in the hot seat, picking up the pieces after the sad event. It wasn't easy, because everything was in John's head – and there was an awful lot of it, from the design of the world's first record clamp (he was refused a patent because the Patent Office didn't think it worth their attention), to every last measurement of every component of every deck. He and the other Michell staff had to piece everything together from what they were left with.

Borehamwood is situated right next to Elstree, the centre of Britain's film and TV production industry. Early on in the company's history, John did some collaborations with Stanley Kubrick, doing specific pieces for the sets of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *A Clockwork Orange*, and latterly *Star Wars*. After manufacturing the Transcriptors' Hydraulic Reference under licence in the seventies, he began designing his own decks.



John started making turntables back in the sixties

The Focus One, from the late seventies, was an early sign of promise – and came fitted with a superb unipivot tonearm whose underslung counterweight was the inspiration for Michell's modern TecnoWeight Rega mod.

The company launched its *tour-de-force*, the GyroDec, in 1981 to an unsuspecting world. In its day, the original was sonically highly competitive, and looked stunning. The Syncro followed in the mid-eighties, an affordable, cost-cut version of the Gyro. By the early nineties John Michell was working on the Orbe – which finally surfaced in 1994. It was a cost-no-object Gyro, and sounded a good deal more stable and mastertape-like. Finally, the Spyder Edition of the Gyro arrived around the turn of the new millennium. Dispensing with the costly plinth, it actually sounded a good deal better, and represented superb value for money.



2001: A Space Odyssey

John did only two tonearms – the aforementioned Focus arm – and also the TecnoArm. When it appeared, it was the best 'reworking' of the Rega RB200/202 on sale – with holes drilled in the underside of the tube to add rigidity, extra damping, improved wiring and an elegant counterweight arrangement.

It sounded great for the money, and was an ideal entry-level partner for the TecnoDec or GyroDec. Since John's death, Michell has made some minor refinements to the GyroDec, but released no new products until now. The company has a new cartridge on the way, called Cusis – which is Greek term meaning to hear naturally. Costing around £1,100, it has a carbon-loaded acrylic body,

which appears semi-translucent if you hold it up to the light. "You can see those little flecks of carbon," says Steve, "which is ideal for resonance dispersal." Its generator is made by Benz, so should sound excellent.

Service with a smile

One largely unsung side of Michell Engineering is customer support. Basically, any owner – regardless of whether they bought the deck new or not – can bring their turntable in for a service, or even a full restoration to 'new' standard. It makes a strong case for running a Michell, especially as the prices are extremely modest compared with other manufacturers. The company can polish out scratches, service bearings, update decks to the latest spec and rebox it with



The Syncro was Michell's eighties attempt at an affordable turntable and is now very rare

new packaging materials for very reasonable rates – all done by the same people that make them new. The decks are generally highly reliable, but occasionally have electronic failures which can be easily fixed.

Don't be fooled by the striking-looking products coming out of the Michell Engineering factory gates – the company is actually run in an incredibly down to earth way. The world of higher-end turntables is hardly devoid of hype, yet I find Steve Rowland, his wife (and company director) Julie and son-in-law (and factory manager) Jonathan Nye, surprisingly candid about the challenges they've faced. The company is very much a 'what you see is what you get' affair, with no marketing speak or hyperbole. That's a tradition carried over from John Michell, who could talk the hind legs off a donkey when describing his turntables, but who I never heard utter a single word of hype ●

Picture credit: MGM



Michell's greatest, genre-defining design – the GyroDec. Originally launched in 1981



The Focus One was a fine mid-price seventies design, based loosely on the Hydraulic Ref



The Spyder Edition of the GyroDec dispensed with the beautiful Perspex