

**FIELD MEDIC >** Intended to survive the rigors of the road, the main components on the SA-5 are user-replaceable, and the included manual clearly explains how to keep the unit in top form.

**THE STRAIGHT AND NARROW >** The SA-5 boasts a front-panel design that is completely devoid of any knobs or screws, which allows turntablists clear and unobstructed access to all of the unit's available parameters.

# STANTON SA-5

## THE LATEST 2-CHANNEL BATTLE-AXE

BY ROBERT OLEYSYCK

> Legend has it that at some time during the late 1970s in the Bronx, an aspiring teenage hip-hop DJ was practicing in his room when his mother banged on the door to complain about how loud it was. He stopped the record with his hand and subconsciously moved the record back and forth over the same sound so he could pick up where he left off prior to the interruption. Hearing the resulting "scratch" sounds in the headphones, he thought it sounded pretty cool and began to practice it, later exposing the technique to others. That DJ became Grand Wizard Theodore, and it was from his accidental discovery that scratching and turntablism evolved.

It's amazing to see how much this segment of DJ culture has grown since then. Hand in hand with the global DJ explosion of the mid-to-late '90s, turntablism has developed its own culture, language and lifestyle. Further proof of this growing phenomenon can be seen in the opening of DJ schools around the world during the past few years. And in February of this year, Boston's Berklee College of Music announced that it will be the first music college in the world to incorporate the study of turntablism into its curriculum.

Gear manufacturers have met the demand for battle and scratch mixers throughout the years, making improvements in features and reliability along the way. However, it seems that the best products are always designed to meet the requirements of an actual user or group of users. The Stanton SA-5 is a shining example of this. Designed based on the specific requirements of DJ Infamous from The Allies DJ crew, the

### PRODUCT SUMMARY

**STANTON**  
**SA-5 > \$399**  
Pros: Packed with innovative and useful features. High-quality Penny+Giles faders. Excellent value.  
Cons: Fader contour switches instead of knobs. Crossfader cut not steep enough for some.  
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**THE OLD IN-OUT >** The back-panel connections include two sets of phono and line-level RCA channel inputs, a stereo RCA Session input, a  $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch mic input and a  $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch headphone out, as well as  $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch and RCA outputs.

Stanton SA-5 is touted as the first professional battle mixer that does not have a single rotary knob (on the face). It is also the official mixer of the Allies All-Star Beatdown, an ongoing worldwide competition that is openly judged. (Log on to [www.the-allies.com](http://www.the-allies.com) for more information.) The amount of thought and care that went into the design of this board clearly shows. Packed with virtually every feature that a turntablist could desire, the SA-5 is well-laid-out and has great sound quality; plenty of power; smooth, high-quality Penny+Giles faders; and several thoughtful touches that easily put it in the upper echelon of battle-style DJ mixers.

#### POWERING UP

Aside from the unit's durable aluminum chassis, the first mark of quality one will notice is the external wall-wart power supply that locks into the back of the unit—a nice touch. The dark-gray paint job with white markings and blue accents is easy on the eyes, and all of the controls are easy to find and placed logically. Another standout feature is the recessed pair of headphone jacks located on the front of the unit. There are separate  $\frac{1}{4}$ - and  $\frac{1}{8}$ -inch outputs, and they're positioned so that, when connected, the plugs are completely out of the way—a great feature that will be appreciated by anyone who has ever ripped his or her headphones out of the socket while spinning. There's also an additional  $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch headphone output on the rear. The front panel sports three-way fader-curve switches for each of the two channels and the crossfader, allowing DJs to select between a long fade, a medium fade or a steep cut, independent of the other faders. Some may prefer having continuous control knobs instead, but that would spoil the “no-knob” concept of this board. Three lights also indicate whether the fader or crossfader reverse switches are engaged.

Perhaps some of the coolest features on the Stanton SA-5 are the OS2 optical phono/line, or transform, switches. These switches are so light that you can almost blow on them to make them work, and I'm not talking about a full-lung, blow-your-head-down huff and puff, either. You can almost crab with them. Plus, with a little bit of simple sur-

gery, the OS2 switches can be rotated to eight different positions, allowing DJs to customize the direction of the throw based on their personal preferences or particular routines. You don't have to worry about accidentally hitting the switches, either, as there is an easily accessible OS2 Lock switch right on the face, as well as an indicator light that tells you when the OS2s are locked.

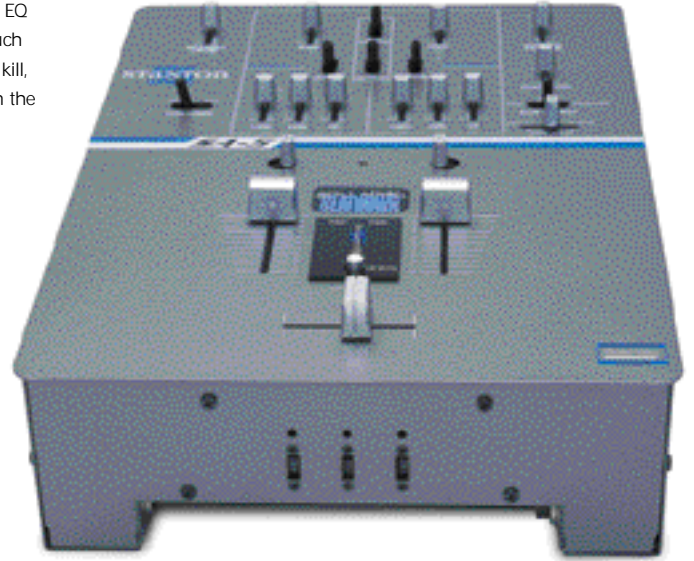
Continuing with the face, all of the fader sliders have tall metal posts that insert into the plastic switch housing, thus reducing breakage. For those of you with a really aggressive style, the SA-5 comes with a nifty set of replacement switches and a small tube of fader lubricant—very thoughtful indeed. The main faders are of the standard length, with input-level meters for each channel in between and a handy headphone-mute button, yet another feature that I'm sure came from DJ Infamous. Just above the main fader section are the OS2 switches—which are right where they ought to be. Each channel also has a 3-band EQ section that is controlled with sliders, not knobs. Each of the three sliders is rated at a range of +9 dB to virtual kill, and a tactile center marks when you're at zero.

A Fader Reverse switch for each channel and the crossfader-reverse (CF Reverse) switch are grouped together. Otherwise known as hamster switches, these reverse switches cause the associated fader to operate in the opposite direction. Up becomes down; down becomes up; or left becomes right, and right becomes left. There's even a program-reverse (PGM Reverse) switch that reverses the signals of input channels 1 and 2, meaning that when active, all of the controls for channel 1 will actually control channel 2 and vice versa. Sound confusing? All of these options can be if you don't know what you're doing.

Independent Gain faders for each channel are centered at the top of the board, and the Master Volume fader in the upper right is mirrored by a Session Level fader in the upper left. Depending on how the switch is set in the back, the Session Level fader controls either a microphone input or a Session input, meaning DJs can cascade or daisy-chain multiple boards to each other via RCA cords for a multi-DJ performance. For instance, say that

## REVIEW > SA-5

**BOOST AND KILL** > The 3-band EQ section of the SA-5 boasts as much as +9 dB of gain down to virtual kill, allowing turntablists to zero in on the perfect frequency range.



there are two DJs with a total of four turntables and two mixers. The main output from setup 1 (the slave setup) would be routed to the Session input of setup 2 (the master setup), allowing the master setup to control the volume of all turntables and mixing boards. This feature is usually not found at this price point, helping to put the Stanton SA-5 further ahead of the competition.

Along with the Cue Level, the Cue Pan allows the DJ to cue between channels 1 and 2 or a continuously selectable blend between the two. In addition, a three-position Cue Select switches between Pre, Post and Master cue modes. On this feature, Pre and Post refer to the crossfader: Pre-fader means that you'll hear the signal of the selected channel regardless of the fader and crossfader positions; Post-fader means that you'll hear the signal of the selected channel only as it corresponds to the crossfader position—that is, if you're trying to cue channel 1 and the crossfader is set to the right position in standard operation mode, you won't hear anything. Master cue mode means that you'll only hear the signal that the board is putting out, even if the Master Volume control is turned down. Again, this may seem a bit confusing, but for professional turntablists, it's a blessing to have these cue options to satisfy different preferences and techniques.

The back of the Stanton SA-5 is outfitted with all of the proper trimmings. Each of the two channels is outfitted with stereo RCA phono and line inputs, a separate grounding post and an independent Phono Trim knob that helps to compensate for minor differences between turntables or lets the DJs adjust how "hot" they like their signal to be before it reaches the faders. The Master section features 1/4-inch stereo balanced outputs for high-quality audio, as well as the option to connect via unbalanced RCAs. The Master also has its own trim knob, allowing for even more control.

## WELL SPUN

Although my specialty lies in long, smooth mixing and programming, the Stanton SA-5 is still pleasant

to work with. The sound quality is very good, the cue bus is loud and clear, and the silky-smooth faders are a pleasure to handle. In fact, I was surprised at how much juice the board had. DJs should be careful in how they handle the gain volume faders, though, because a wrong move could prove disastrous to a sound system.

To get a better perspective, I asked my good friend and talented turntablist to take a swing at the Stanton SA-5 for a few days. Hailing from Las Vegas, DJ McKenzie put the board through its paces, and this is what he had to say: He was quick to point out all of the innovative features and attention to detail on the SA-5, especially the Session Level fader; the OS2 transformer switches; and the three cue settings, which allow you to hear scratches and juggles in the headphones. McKenzie also liked the screwless face, the additional trims on the back, the reverse switches and the screw-on power connection. The only gripes that he had were that the cut setting on the crossfader didn't seem quite steep enough, and the grounding posts are cramped by the trim knobs; he would also prefer a rotary knob for the contour controls instead of a three-position switch. McKenzie also pointed out that the mixer gets pretty hot after extended use. Overall, though, he said that he'd be proud to own one.

Because mixing boards of this kind need to withstand hours upon hours of use and punishment, they're often designed with user-replaceable parts, and the SA-5 is no exception. The manual clearly explains how to clean and lubricate faders and replace them if necessary, as well as how to rotate the OS2 switches. With a little patience and common sense, disassembly is fairly easy. Overall, the SA-5 deserves high praise for its innovative design, which stems from a keen understanding of its user base. Vestax and Rane have dominated the high-end battle-mixer segment for years now. However, with the mound of features, flexibility, quality and innovation found here, turntablists should consider the Stanton SA-5 as a viable and extremely affordable option. 