

# ROCK IN A BOX



## SESSIONMASTER GUITAR PREAMP

**What, use a guitar amp and a microphone? Not PAUL WHITE, he just wants to plug in and go!**

Most guitar players have their own approach to getting their live sound more or less as they want it, but in the studio, it's often difficult to recapture the same magic. I know this because I've been on the receiving end before now! If you take in your own amplifier, it's either too loud or the engineer mics it up so that it sounds totally different, and what's worse, you don't know just how different it does sound until you come to hear the playback. Conversely, if you try to DI the guitar through some sort of preamp, it invariably sounds dreadful. But does it have to? If only you could get the right sound from a preamp, it would save a lot of time and you'd hear the sound you were actually going to end up with right from the start.

Unfortunately, studio preamps have got themselves something of a bad name — the first models were pretty grim and, just like the stigma attached to early solid-state amps, the reputation persists. The good news is that some very serious work has gone into guitar preamp design over the past two or three years and some very tasty products are starting to emerge. These tend to fall into two categories: the guitar multi-effects preamp and the basic preamp with no effects of its own other than overdrive. In my experience to

date, the latter type seem to produce the best guitar sound, at least in the overdrive department, though I admit to being quite taken with one or two of the newer multi-effects preamps as well. Most studios, even small home facilities, have some form of multi-effects unit, so it may be equally effective, and a lot cheaper, to plug a no-frills recording preamp into whatever you already own.

### The Rock Sound

Why is it so difficult to make a guitar preamp that sounds good when plugged directly into a mixing desk? Getting a good clean sound isn't really the problem, but reproducing the sound of an overdriven amplifier is more problematic, since it is influenced by a very complex blend of factors. The rock guitar sound wasn't invented, it evolved, largely due to the shortcomings of the technology of the period — a combination of valve amplifier design limitations, the need to produce enough volume to compete with a drum kit, and the appalling frequency response of the only loudspeakers that could handle the power. If none of these limitations had existed, the modern rock guitar sound might be quite different.

A well-designed preamplifier can emulate the

## SessionMaster Direct Recording Preamps

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tone control section and overdrive characteristics of a real amplifier surprisingly accurately, but the real problem is in imitating the effect of the loudspeaker. A typical rock guitar speaker acts as a very efficient filter, removing all the high-frequency, buzzy harmonics — and because guitar speakers have always done this, the accepted rock guitar sound is smooth and raunchy, but with no real top end. If you've ever plugged an overdrive pedal directly into a mixing console and then wondered why the result sounds so thin and buzzy, it's simply because you're hearing all those high harmonics that the speaker normally takes out. Guitar speakers also become less efficient as they are played louder, which has the effect of compressing the sound. Consequently, some guitar preamps contain an element of compression to make their simulation more realistic.

Guitar preamplifiers intended for use in the studio are fitted with a filtered output designed to imitate the filtering effect of a

typical guitar loudspeaker. This feature is often known as speaker simulation, and without it, it's virtually impossible to get a good DI'd rock sound. If the speaker simulator is well designed, the sound you get when you plug into your mixer is very similar to the sound you'd get by miking up a guitar amplifier. You may need to add a few effects, particularly reverb, to take the

*"The unit is particularly good at producing mildly distorted guitar sounds that respond to picking intensity — great for recreating vintage blues sounds."*

dry, clinical edge off it, but a good unit, properly used, can produce a wide range of clean and rock sounds which are virtually indistinguishable from the real thing.

Aside from the convenience aspect, these preamps allow you to record at any time of day without making too much noise, you don't have to worry about room acoustics or traffic noise, and you can record at the same time as other musicians without their sounds getting onto the guitar track or vice versa.

### The Sessionmaster

Sessionmaster was designed by guitar guru Stewart Ward, the inventor of the popular Sessionette guitar combo. It is a simple, compact guitar preamplifier, capable of producing both clean and overdriven guitar sounds, with an integral speaker simulator so that it can be used straight into a recording console or Portastudio. There are no fancy effects or even channel switching, but the flexibility offered by the five knobs and three buttons is surprising.

Sessionmaster is not a new concept — indeed, it has been on sale for around a year now, but what I have before me is the very first production model of the Mark II. I was so impressed with the original Sessionmaster that I use it for the majority of my studio work and also on the rare occasions I play live. However, the Mark II incorporates a couple of significant advances, enabling it to produce a much wider range of clean guitar sounds, while the overdrive sound has also been improved.

The first direct recording preamp as reviewed by Rick Desmond's 'Recording Musician' magazine. This was one of Rick's earliest publications.