

LINE 6

POD

Your direct line to classic guitar amps.

By Michael Ross

Within the past decade, numerous products have come to market that provide alternatives to the old-fashioned way of recording electric guitar tracks. These include everything from straightforward tube direct boxes with built-in amp simulators to products that digitally simulate every link of the signal chain—the guitar, amp, and cabinet, as well as the microphone and its positioning. But only in recent years has some of this equipment begun to yield impressive results.

Line 6 has been a force in the evolution of such products since the 1997 release of its AxSys 212 (reviewed in the September 1997 *EM*). The AxSys was followed by *Amp Farm*, a Pro Tools TDM plug-in with the same physical modeling.

The latest product from Line 6 is Pod (no "the"), an easy-to-use direct box that dispenses both with the hassle of carrying and miking an amp and cabinet and with the expense of running a full-blown Pro Tools system. The attractive,

kidney-shaped Pod provides 28 amp simulations, 15 effects, and extensive editing capabilities—all for under \$400.

AT FIRST GLANCE

A quick tour of Pod's top panel reveals ten rotary controls and eight buttons. Stepped controls are provided for Amp Models and Effects (see the sidebars "Pod Effects" and "Amp Modeling Guide"). The other knobs are for Output Level, Drive, Bass, Middle, Treble, Channel Volume, Reverb, and Effect Tweak. The buttons include Manual mode, Tuner, Noise Gate, MIDI, Save, Tap Tempo, and Up and Down arrows for scrolling through parameters. A single-character, multi-purpose LED is used for everything from MIDI channel assignment to guitar-string pitch.

Connections form a ring around the sides of Pod and include a ¼-inch instrument-level input, a ¼-inch stereo headphone jack, MIDI In and Out ports, and a pair of balanced +4 dBu ¼-inch outputs. (The latter will also work with unbalanced -10 dBV equipment.) The Acoustically Integrated Response (A.I.R.) switch allows you to choose between modes that are optimized for direct recording and for use with an amp.

An RJ-45 jack lets you connect one of the optional Line 6 foot controllers. The Floor Board (\$299) features a Vox-style wah-wah pedal, an Ernie Ball-style volume pedal, on/off buttons for effects,

bank and channel selection, a digital tuner, tap tempo, and editing capabilities. (Note that wah-wah is inaccessible without the Floor Board.) A more economical foot controller is the FB4 (\$79), which provides only four buttons for channel selection, as well as tap tempo.

ART OF MODELING

Amp modeling is the process of digitally re-creating the tone of an amp as well as the way its components interact. Line 6 doesn't name specific amplifiers on the unit but does provide a handy comparison chart in the manual. For example, the company modeled its Small Tweed amp on the Fender Tweed Deluxe; Black Panel replicates a Fender Deluxe Reverb; Modern Class A copies the handmade Matchless Chief-tain; and Brit Class A simulates a Vox AC30. Pod Clean is a hybrid of the high-end characteristics of a solid-state Roland JC-120 Jazz Chorus amp and the low-end characteristics of a Marshall JTM-45 tube head.

Fuzz Box (more of an effect than an amp) is based on the Dallas Arbiter Fuzz Face made famous by Jimi Hendrix. The Tube Preamp preset allows you to use Pod as if it were a tube direct box—handy for vocals or other instruments. In addition to the 16 amp settings on the front of the unit, 12 more are available through MIDI.

Line 6's modeling is so complete that Pod's tone controls are programmed to work like those on the original amplifiers. For example, if the original amp had only one tone control, it would typically be a treble cut. When Pod models such an amp, its mid and bass controls are used for postamp tone shaping, as if you were adjusting EQ on the mixing board. In addition, if the modeled amp had a spring reverb, Pod's Reverb knob will access a replica of that sound. (If the original had no reverb, the Reverb knob will provide a digital room sound.) Line 6's designers are real fans of tube-amp technology, and with Pod they have done their best to capture all the little idiosyncrasies of the original amps.

One thing that is conspicuously missing from Pod, however, is a bypass switch. Considering that the unit is meant to be a direct box, it's curious that there's no way to get a direct, unprocessed signal (short of manually unpatching from the unit). If you need



From Pod's front panel, you have instant access to 16 amps and 15 effects. Using Emagic's *Sound-Diver* software, you can access 12 additional amps and edit the effects extensively.

POD EFFECTS (FRONT PANEL)

Compressor	Delay/Compressor
Tremolo	Delay/Tremolo
Chorus 1 (using a square-wave LFO)	Delay/Chorus 1
Chorus 2 (using a sine-wave LFO)	Delay/Chorus 2
Flanger 1 (light flanging)	Delay/Flanger 1
Flanger 2 (heavy flanging)	Delay/Flanger 2
Rotary Speaker	Delay/Swell
Delay	

a direct signal and you don't want to repatch your guitar every time, the easiest alternative would be to create a patch that approximates a direct sound and save it as a user preset.

STRONGLY EFFECTED

Pod's effects are also designed with classic tones in mind. Compressor is placed before the amp in the internal effects chain and replicates an MXR Dynacomp stompbox rather than a studio-style rack-mount compressor. The Tremolo effect models Fender amp-style tremolo. Tap Tempo and Effect Tweak often access the most useful parameters of an effect. With Compressor, for example, Effect Tweak controls the compression ratio.

For modulation effects such as Chorus, Flanger, and Rotary, the Tap Tempo button typically controls the speed, and Effect Tweak controls depth. For Delay, you can tap in the tempo of the repeats and use Effect Tweak to adjust the blend. "But what about the number of repeats?" I hear you asking. Those are accessible only through MIDI. With the preset delay effects, longer delay times automatically have more repeats programmed in, whereas short slapback delays have fewer repeats.

In the effect-combination settings, Tap Tempo is usually assigned to delay time, and Effect Tweak to delay blend. A sensible exception is Delay/Tremolo, for which Tap Tempo sets the tremolo rate.

DEEP TWEAKING

Pod makes personalizing the sounds as easy as can be, even without referring to the documentation: plug in your guitar, hit Manual, and start twisting knobs. Nevertheless, Pod's user manual will help you discover hidden tweaks, such as pressing Tap Tempo while turning the Drive knob for extra distortion or while

turning the Treble knob for a presence boost. Depending on the amp model chosen, the latter matches the effect of the original's presence control.

Once you've tweaked the amp and effects to your liking, hit Save, pick a user location, and hit Save again. Pod has only 36 user memory locations: 9 for

each of the four banks. Considering the amount of editing you can do with this unit, it probably won't take you long to come up with enough great patches to exceed the memory locations.

Speaking of tweaking, Pod is conveniently bundled with the *Pod Tools* CD-ROM (Mac/Win), which includes *Pro Tools* (version 3.4) as well as Emagic's *SoundDiver* software. *SoundDiver* has an intuitive, easy-to-use interface and gives you access to 12 additional amp simulations and a host of editable parameters, such as speaker-cabinet type; chorus predelay; reverb diffusion, density, and tone; and attack time of the auto swell.

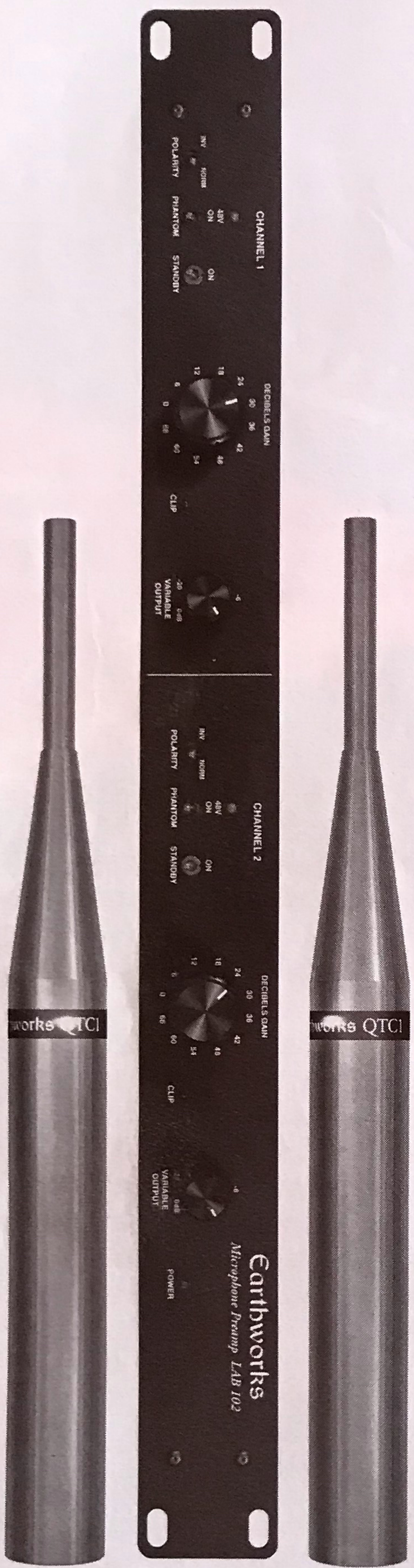
To use Pod with *SoundDiver*, simply connect the unit to your computer using a MIDI interface and MIDI cables. *SoundDiver* uses SysEx to communicate with Pod. When you're finished customizing a patch, you can download it

Amp Modeling Guide

The table below lists Pod's patch names and the amp that each patch models. Patches marked with an asterisk (*) are not available from Pod's front panel; they must be downloaded to the unit via MIDI.

Patch Name	Modeled Amp
Tube Preamp	Tube instrument preamp
Pod Clean	'87 Roland JC-120/Marshall JTM-45 hybrid
Pod Crunch	Line 6 high-gain hybrid
Pod Drive	Layered amp hybrid
Pod Layer	Pod Clean/Pod Drive layered
Small Tweed	'52 Fender Tweed Deluxe
Small Tweed #2*	'60 Tweed Fender Champ
Tweed Blues	'59 Fender Bassman
Black Panel	'64 Fender Deluxe Reverb
Black Panel #2*	'65 Blackface Fender Twin
Modern Class A	'96 Matchless Chieftain
Brit Class A	'60 Vox AC30 with top boost
Brit Class A #2*	'60 Vox AC30 nontop boost
Brit Class A #3*	'60 Vox AC15
Brit Blues	'65 Marshall JTM-45
Brit Classic	'68 Marshall Plexi 50-watt
Brit Hi Gain	'90 Marshall JCM-800
Rectified	'94 Mesa Boogie Dual Rectifier Tremoverb combo
Rectified #2*	'95 Mesa Boogie Dual Rectifier head
Modern Hi Gain	'89 Soldano Modified X88R rack preamp
Modern Hi Gain #2*	'89 Soldano Super Lead Overdrive (SLO)
Fuzz Box	'60s Dallas Arbiter Fuzz Face
Jazz Clean*	'87 Roland JC-120
Boutique #1*	Dumble Overdrive Special clean channel
Boutique #2*	Dumble Overdrive Special drive channel
Boutique #3*	Budda Twinmaster head
California Crunch #1*	'85 Mesa Boogie Mark IIc+ clean channel
California Crunch #2*	'85 Mesa Boogie Mark IIc+ drive channel

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Pod Specifications

Inputs	(1) ¼" balanced instrument
Outputs	(2) ¼" balanced; (1) ¼" stereo headphone
Other Ports	MIDI In and Out; RJ-45 foot controller
Maximum Input Level	+2 dBV
Maximum Output Level	+20 dBu
Dynamic Range	>90 dB
Presets (RAM/ROM)	36/36
Effects	(8) single effects; (7) effect combinations
A/D Converters	24-bit; multistage hybrid; 64x oversampling
D/A Converters	20-bit; 128x oversampling
Power Supply	9 VAC; 1,200 mA minimum; "lump in the line"
Weight	3 lbs.
Dimensions	3" (H) x 10.5" (W) x 7" (D)

to Pod for use away from the computer. You can also transfer patches between Pods using a single MIDI cable.

Pod sends and responds to MIDI Program Change and Controller messages. This allows you to preprogram specific amplifier and effect changes into a sequence so that you can concentrate on the guitar performance when you begin tracking. On the other hand, you needn't commit to a particular amp model when you track your guitar parts. Play the guitar directly into the recorder using Pod for monitoring only, just as you might with any other effect. At mixdown, you can route the guitar track through Pod and choose the amp and effects that work best with the mix, using a MIDI sequencer to automate features as needed.

STUDIO SESSIONS

For critical listening, I took Pod to San Francisco's Studio 132, a hard-disk-based studio running Pro Tools III and *Studio Vision Pro*. The guitar, a Fernandes Strat with Rio Grande single-coil pickups, was plugged into Pod before going stereo into the Yamaha O2R board.

To evaluate how true a particular amp simulation is, one needs to be familiar with the original amp tone. I'm a Fender guy, and I can tell you that Pod's Small Tweed model was scary: think Neil Young. The Black Panel preset nails my amp of choice.

In addition to sounding like a specific amplifier, each Pod amp model sounds and feels like an exceptionally good example of that particular model. (Not all vintage equipment sounds

good, after all.) BZ Lewis, the owner/engineer of Studio 132 and an avowed Marshall guy, deemed Pod's Brit Hi Gain setting a sterling representation of the Marshall JCM-800.

Pod's amps offer just what guitarists have coveted in fine amplifiers for years: the ability to set the amp for a good, crunchy lead tone at full throttle but have it clean up when you back off the guitar's volume. With Pod, you can actually play heavily attacked, clean funk chords and then turn up and get singing sustain—something only the best amps will do.

The clean tube-amp settings feature the kind of distortion-free give, or *sag*, that is normally associated with tubes.

LINE 6

Pod guitar direct box

\$399

FEATURES ■■■■■

EASE OF USE ■■■■■

AUDIO QUALITY ■■■■■

VALUE ■■■■■

1 2 3 4 5

PROS: Easy to use. Versatile. Solid construction. Comprehensive set of amps. Accurate amp emulations. Comes bundled with editing and recording software.

CONS: No bypass switch. Not rack mountable. Zipper noise occurs when making large patch changes.

CIRCLE #440 ON READER SERVICE CARD

strument
) 1/4" stereo headphone
 J-45 foot controller

(7) effect combinations
 hybrid; 64x oversampling
 sampling
 inimum; "lump in the line"

x 7" (D)

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 diting and recording software.
 No bypass switch. Not rack mount-
 Zipper noise occurs when making
 patch changes.

#440 ON READER SERVICE CARD

POD

adds to the realism of the amp
 modeled and helps you forget
 you're plugged directly into the
 amp. When you're recording direct,
 Line 6's A.I.R. technology simulates a
 cabinet in a room, so what you
 hear through the studio monitors is
 what you get when you record.

PLUG 'N' PLAY

Plugging Pod up with *SoundDiver* and
 recording was a piece of cake. Once we set
 up a MIDI channel, we were immedi-
 ately able to change programs, access
 extra amp models, and modulate
 parameters on the fly. Radical changes
 in parameters or patches created zipper
 noise; fortunately Line 6 is aware of
 this. The manual suggests using grad-
 ual shifts to avoid audio artifacts.

Next, we plugged Pod into a MosValve
 power amp and two Peavey Black Widow
 speaker cabinets and, later, into a Fend-
 er Dual Showman with a 1 x 15-inch cab-
 inet. The coloration introduced by the
 Showman tempered the realism of the
 modeling a bit too much for my taste,
 but the power-amp setup showed the po-
 tential of Pod in live situations: it was
 so quiet that I noticed how quiet the unit is.
 With single-coil pickups in a high-
 gain situation, Pod's front-panel Noise
 Gate proved virtually unnecessary.

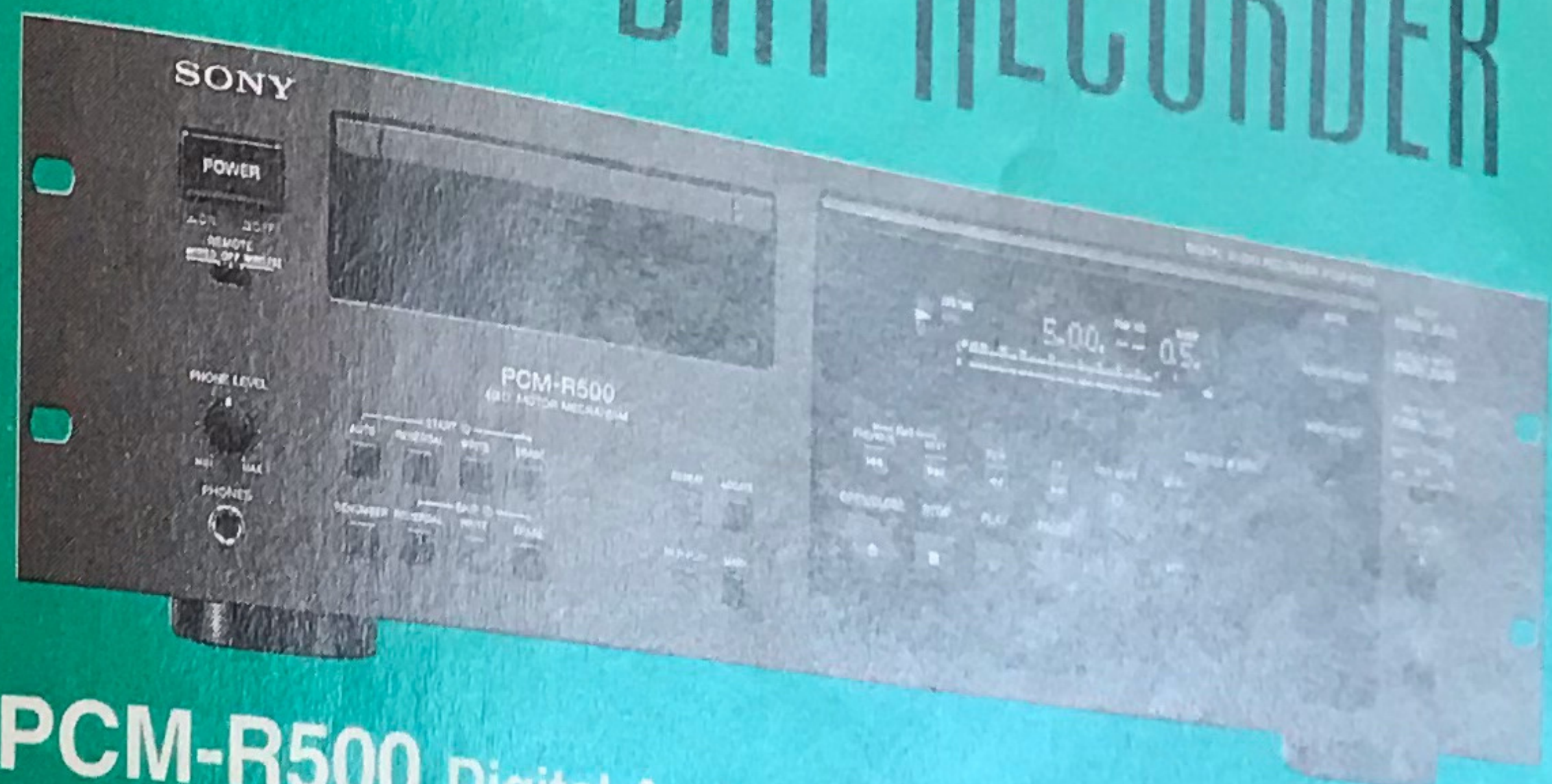
AREA CHANGE

Whether plugged into a power amp
 or sent directly into a con-
 sole or P.A. system, Pod offers a variety
 of tones in a small package. Line 6
 offers a Pod Mounting Adapter (\$24.95)
 that allows you to clip the unit to an
 amp handle or mount it on a mic
 stand. Although this offers some handy
 options for stage use, a rack version of
 Pod would be welcome to ease patch-
 ing into other effects and to better ac-
 commodate studio ergonomics.

For the personal recordist, the ses-
 sion musician on the go, or anyone who
 wants instantaneous great tone for re-
 cording, Pod is an answer to your
 prayers. Between its 28 amp models and
 effects, Pod gives you enough sounds
 to keep you busy for some time. And
 with its MIDI and editing possibilities,
 Pod has the potential to answer prayers
 you haven't even thought of yet.

Michael Ross is a freelance musician, pro-
 ducer, and writer living in New York City.
 He is the author of *Getting Great Guitar
 Sounds* (Hal Leonard Publishing).

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