



# Fender Passport 500 Pro Review

by Stevie Coyle

It's likely that when the vast majority of *Acoustic Guitar* readers see the Fender name, PA systems will not leap to mind. But Fender has been manufacturing and selling pro sound for decades. In recent years the Passport series of PAs has included units ranging from hand-held tour-guide-style units to multichannel mixer/amp units with power ranging from 27 to 500 watts. But what unites every product in the Passport line is that they're designed as easy-to-use systems whose components snap together for simple transport. The Passport 500 Pro is the latest, top-of-the-line unit, and where earlier 500s included microphones, cables, and an extensive array of digital effects, the new design goes for lean and mean, with greater power; lighter weight; more directional, feedback-resistant speakers; beefed-up low end (even at low volume); and two flexible, high-end reverbs. Inputs abound on the 500 Pro, making it easy as pie to plug in CD players, MP3 players, and even laptops, in addition to your instruments and vocals.

## **Portable Power**

The Passport 500 Pro is an all-in-one kit designed to be toted in one hand. The speakers clamp directly to the amp/mixer unit, which has six phantom-powered mic/line inputs and two stereo 1/4-inch and 1/8-inch inputs. Five hundred watts power two speaker cabinets, each loaded with a single Celestion-manufactured ten-inch woofer and a single 11/5-inch tweeter. Each channel sports a three-color input-level LED and 20-dB pad as well as controls for input gain, high EQ, low EQ, effects loop, and reverb send. Nothing too surprising so far, right? But among this unit's more unusual features are a USB port that allows you to record and play back CD-quality WAV files onto a common USB flash drive, a 1/4-inch active subwoofer-output jack tied to a high-pass filter, a System Tone dial (which functions as a master EQ control of sorts), and a docking station for a Passport wireless receiver.

The whole totable package weighs in at a rather portly 44 pounds. That's 12 pounds lighter than the previous model, but it still seems likely that lots of folks are going to need to

disassemble the component parts just to lift the unit out of the car and carry it into the venue (performers who are concerned about their PA's weight and who may not need as much power should check out Fender's smaller Passport 150 and 300 units). Once onsite, however, setup is simplicity itself. Unsnap the speakers, put 'em where you want 'em, or mount them to 13/8-inch diameter speaker stands (not included). Speaker and power cords live in their own shelved and latchable cabinet on the back of the amp/mixer unit. Very handy.

### **Clarity, Volume, and Presence**

But the proof is in the playing, of course, and overall—at least in the very large living room that was our test venue—the Passport 500 Pro acquitted itself in style. My initial reaction was that it offered good clarity, reasonable volume, and tremendous ease of use, but that it was somewhat less transparent than other systems in this price bracket I've played through; it was a tad more edgy as well and just a bit quieter than I had expected.

For the first pass I ran my Sunrise pickup-equipped Thompson T1-C through the 500 Pro and with minimal tweaking was able to get a big, hefty, present sound I liked quite a lot.

The speaker cabinets' directionality makes most of your feedback-busting a matter of speaker placement, but once you get set up behind them it's a little tough to get a sense of what's happening out front.

With feedback resistance in mind, I auditioned a couple of guitar mics with no pickup signal. Setting up two condensers—an Audix VX10 and a hot-rodded Oktava MK-012—I activated the phantom power switch and discovered the benefit of the speakers' extreme directionality. Even without rolling off much bass I was able to get remarkably good gain-before-feedback from each of the guitars I tried.

I finished by testing a Shure SM58 vocal mic and again noted just a bit of extra crispiness in the high end. Here's where I tested the Passport 500 Pro's two onboard reverbs. I'm a less-is-more kind of guy when it comes to sonic sauce, but I was impressed with the 500 Pro's flexibility. One reverb is darker than the other, but some twiddling with the Time and Tone knobs is sure to net you a room size and decay you'll like. And reverb tended to ameliorate the Passport 500 Pro's bright, sibilant character.

### **Features Galore**

Another way to warm up the mix is to crank the System Tone knob just a bit to the left of center. Think of this as a master tone pot, a way to adjust the EQ of the mix as a whole.

This is an interesting offering—and one I had not seen before—but I can envision another

scenario where it might come in handy. Often what a working band needs is the ability to be heard better as the night goes on and the venue fills up. Sometimes you'll need to add volume, sure, but sometimes giving the whole mix a little extra high-end shimmer can increase audibility without risking feedback or a shout-down with the crowd. And at lower volumes, the 500 Pro's Dynamic EQ, which is kind of like a loudness button on a home stereo, kicks in automatically to increase low-end response.

Two other functions increase the 500 Pro's versatility and usefulness. You can record high-resolution WAV files of the gig and/or play preshow music by popping a flash drive into the USB port. The record/playback function is a breeze to operate and will be of particular interest not only to those folks who like to dissect their previous night's performances, but also those who are looking to get worthy board tapes for live albums and downloads or to mix with camcorder sound for YouTube videos. And if you need extra low end, you can add a powered subwoofer simply by running a cable to the supplied 1/4-inch jack. The unit automatically reads the connection and activates a high-pass filter. Pretty snappy.

### **Portable Goodness**

The Fender Passport 500 Pro is a solid portable PA with good clarity, reasonable volume, and a wealth of standard and nonstandard input options. Acoustic solo or small-combo acts will find plenty of use for it in everything from house concerts to cafés to small clubs.