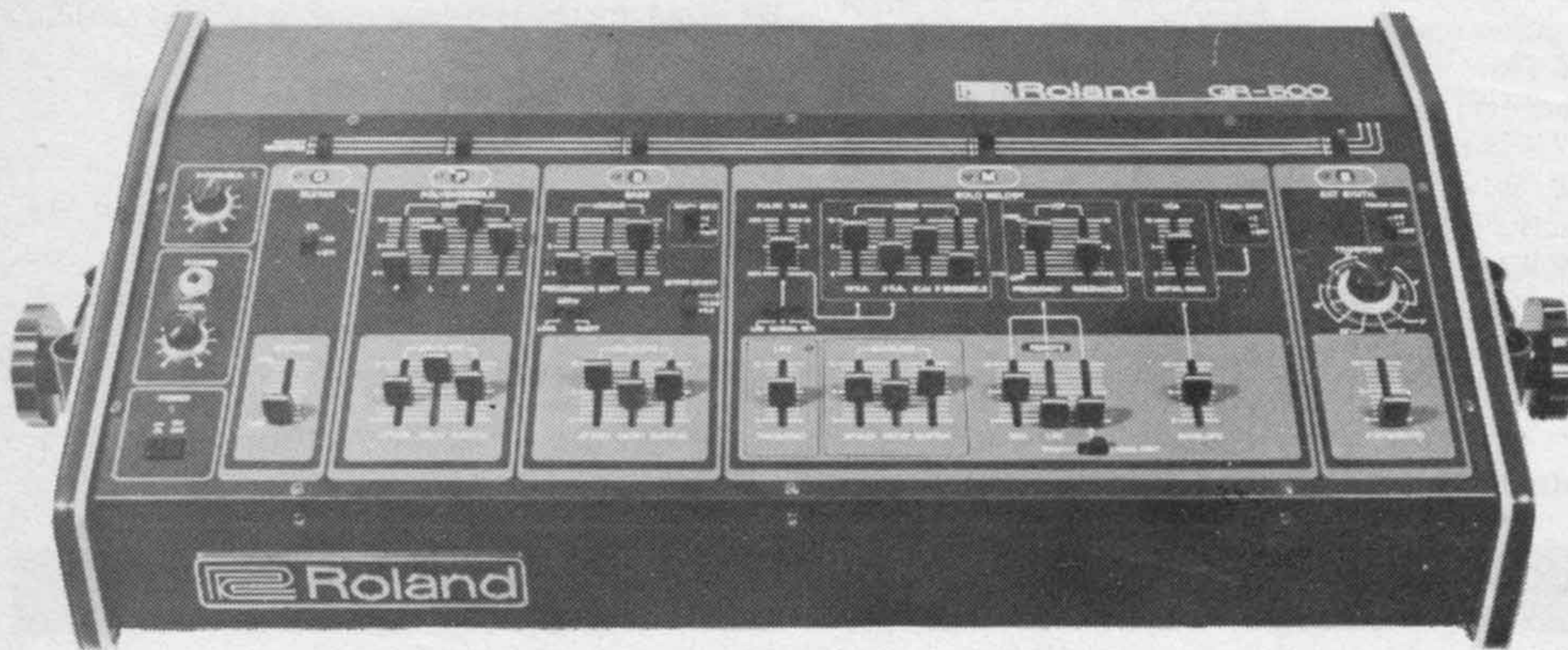
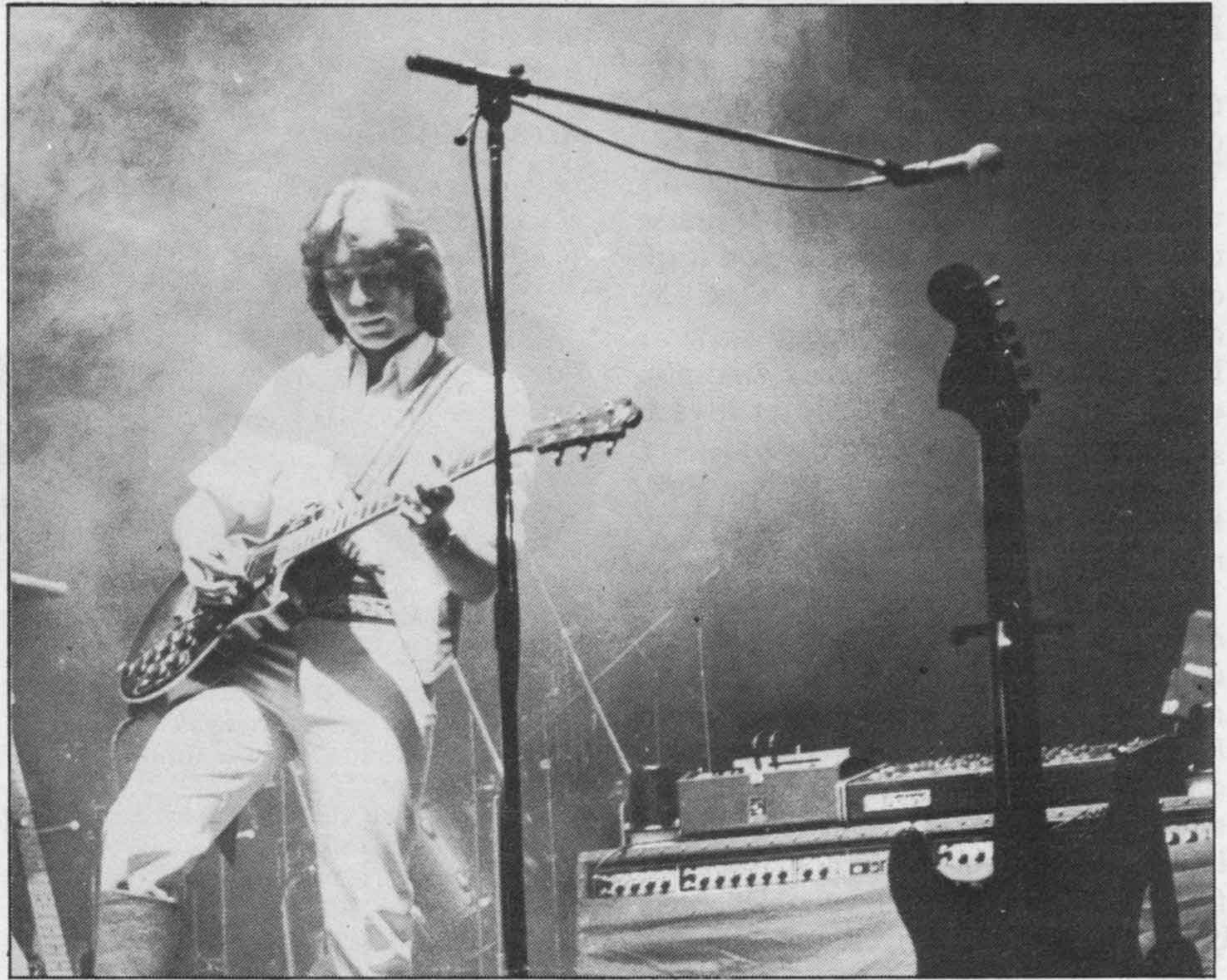


ROLAND G500 by Steve Hackett

What I wanted years and years ago was somebody to design a guitar whereby the sort of sound I could get with various devices on a single line could be obtained when playing chords – I'm a very chord-oriented player. I used to get a sound which was very violin-like, and I obtained this largely through eliminating the 'percussion' from the guitar by using the volume pedal. I would hit a note and then fade in afterwards which, of course, a lot of people did; but I used to use it in combination with a fuzzbox and echo-unit. If you were to play with that set-up quite fast you would get a very unguitar-like sound. In fact, I was always looking for areas that would put the guitar in an 'unguitar' bracket.

It struck me that there were enough guitarists playing to sound like guitars, so I'd try to work in other areas. A lot of criticism was aimed at me for this, people would say, 'You might as well have another keyboard player as have him doing that, you know' . . . I suppose if anything was definable it was due to the



fact that I wasn't competing with the speed merchants.

So I ended up getting these different sounds. What I wanted ideally, as I said, was to be able to get that single line sound into chord form. It was impossible with that sort of set-up, you'd get intermodulation between the strings and the sound would be really muddy if you even *tried* chords. Unless you have a separate pickup, ie total isolation for each string, you were not going to be able to play chords in that style.

With all this in mind I spoke to a few friends about developing something like that, but nothing ever really got off the ground. So I'd given up on that idea, I just thought I'd have to get three guitarists to do it! I suppose I resigned myself to the fact that I could do it in the studio but never do it live.

Then one of my roadies mentioned that Roland had a guitar synthesiser on the market – it seemed right up my street.

Eventually I got one in November 1977, just before I started work on my solo album, *Please Don't Touch*. The fact that I didn't have much time between getting the thing and recording the album was a bit of a drag, but I managed to get my head down with it for about four days prior to the start of the recording to see what sort of settings I'd like to use.

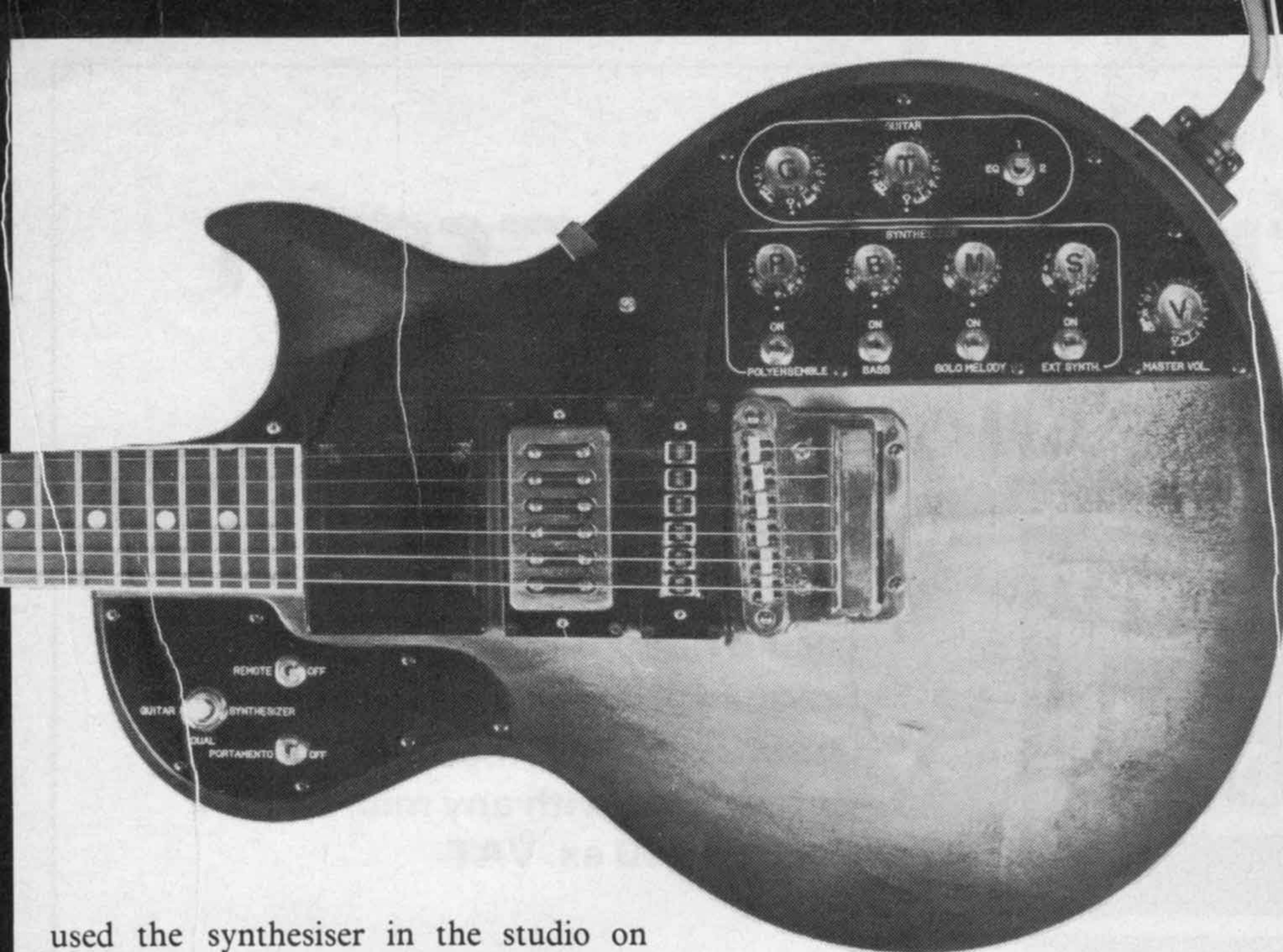
When I first tried the machine out I just started playing relatively simple first inversion chords at the bottom of the neck, but that seemed to blur quite a lot, probably because of the 'thickness' of the notes. When I started playing chords in the second inversion, however, the whole thing started to make a lot more sense. It was rather like a keyboard; if you're playing down at the bottom end of a piano or an organ you tend to get a lot of cloudy overtones which muddy the whole sound. I think the advantage of this synthesiser over the other guitar synths that I've heard is the fact that the Roland is poly-

phonic – but it's obviously up to each individual musician to decide on his or her needs.

I've always thought that the quality which defines a guitar sound is the attack and decay configuration – the attack reflects the percussion aspect of hitting the note, the decay of the note fading away afterwards. With this machine you can eliminate and modify both of those, you can get a very squarewave sustain and the actual percussion doesn't need to be there. Plus you can play chords; so really you have the ability to modulate everything you ever tied into the guitar, in one machine.

The synthesiser comes with a guitar (made by Roland-Ibanez company) which I thought was very well constructed. Although they claim that you can use a straight guitar sound, I found I had virtually no control over this aspect, so in my experience it's best to use the guitar with the synthesiser module, rather than as a straight guitar. But as a synthesiser I've managed to get some totally convincing sounds out of it; I think the great advantage for the guitarist is the ability to be able to get the size of sound that you would normally only expect to get from a keyboard. The makers give you a very useful patch book with the machine that tells you how to set up some sounds, and it also has some spaces for you to note down your own. I've managed to get a whole range of keyboard-like sounds from it – from harmonium to church organ.

Although I'll go on to describe how I



used the synthesiser in the studio on *Please Don't Touch*, I think it will be an ideal instrument to use in live performance. It's the sort of thing that I'll definitely take with me when I next go back on the road. The patching involved is no more complicated, really, than what I had to contend with before on my multiple pedal system – a custom pedalboard, in fact. I would use the synthesiser and a pedalboard combined, ideally. I don't really think that the guitar synth makes guitar effects redundant, it's a little like these people who say that you don't need mellotrons because string-synths have become so refined. My answer to that would be that although the mechanics of something may be obsolete, it doesn't make the instrument or effect obsolete by any means. One of the great advantages of a machine like this synthesiser is that, whereas before one person could make one sort of sound and have to employ a lot of other musicians to make the other sounds, now it gives each musician a greater awareness of other instruments and a greater capability in the reproduction of other instruments' sounds. Basically what it means is that, for arranging purposes, you have less dependency on other people.

And so to the album, *Please Don't Touch*. The Roland guitar synthesiser can be heard quite extensively on this record, and I'll give you a few examples of how I used it. There's a track called *Land Of A Thousand Autumns*, to start with, where I used just guitar synth and 12-string guitar. That's a short track, but I think it's where the synth is most obvious: there's an arpeggio which starts at the bottom, also the Bass section of the synth is included in there too. You can hear from this that, by adjusting the Polyensemble section of the module, you have a lot of control over the tonal qualities, the voicing, of the guitar. The envelope generator in the Polyensemble section is a sort of percussion control, you get attack, decay and sustain sliders. This way you

can either get very long, sustained, wafting notes or very short notes.

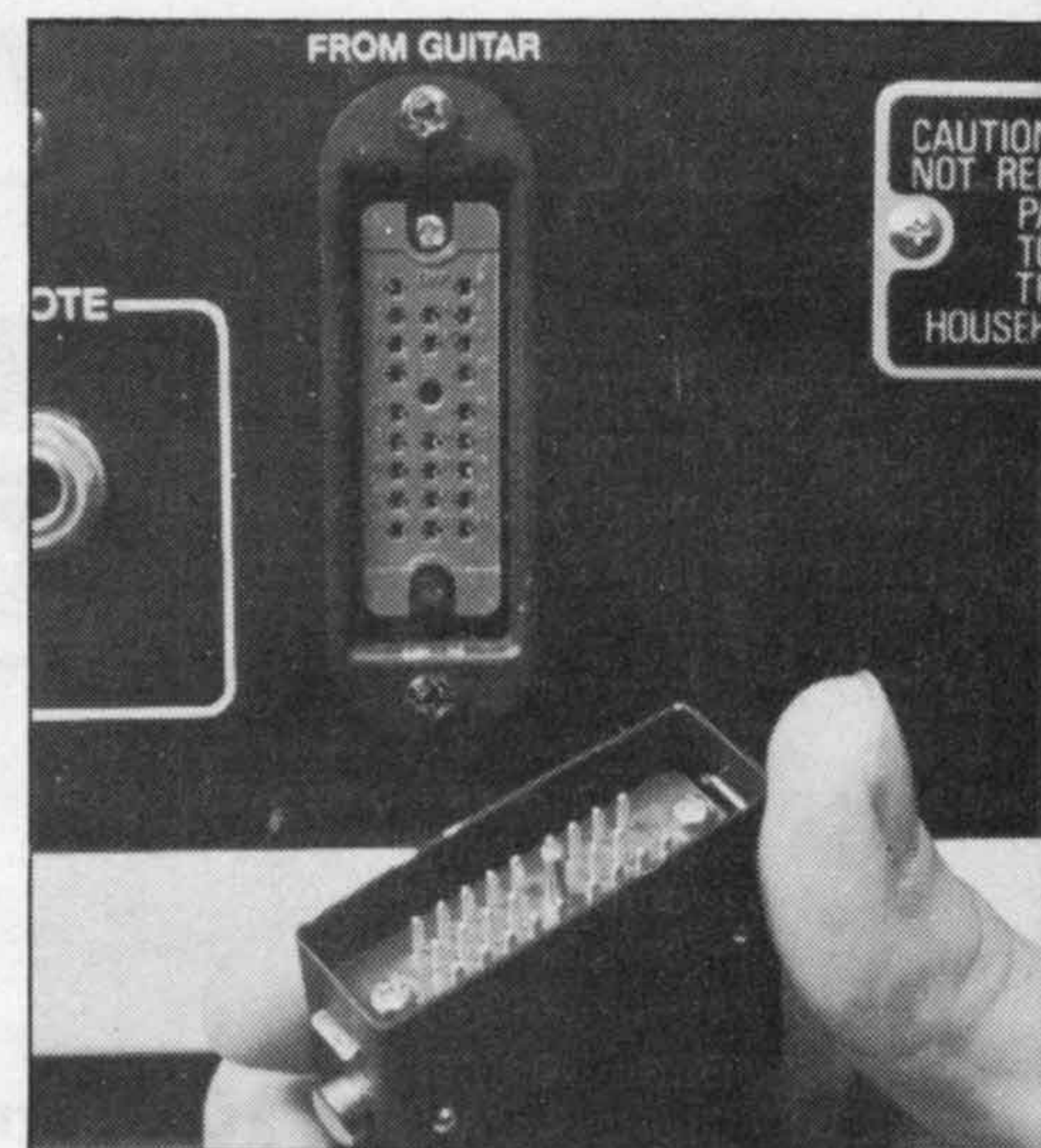
On another track, *Icarus Ascending*, I managed to get an almost trombone-like sound. I messed around with the frequency on the VCF in the Solo Melody section to alter the basic set up sound – I modified the patch-book trombone sound so that I could control the toppiness of the sound with that frequency slider. That way you can take the sound through the range of the brass instrument you've got set up – obviously it's going to get more cornet-like the further up you get, while it's going to be a totally muffled sound, almost french horns or bassoon, down at the bottom. If you listen to *Icarus Ascending*, where the piece goes into some fast changes in terms of the rhythm section with a constant melody, you'll hear dissonant chords to begin with, then I went into a reggae thing that leads to a walking bass part. Then it stops and develops into the 'trombone' guitar synth – although most people seem to think it's a sax!

When you bend a note on the guitar with the trombone sound set up you get the sort of slurred trombone sound – the sound they play for the elephant at the circus – an almost comical sound that gives note-bending another quality altogether. The notes don't sound the way you expect from string bending, they're really much bigger and fuller. Another interesting sound I obtained on the album was on the track called *How Can I*, which Richie Havens sings. On the second verse a harmonium appears to come in – it's not a harmonium, nor is it a bass guitar, it's all the guitar synthesiser. The bass sound comes from the Bass section on the module, with me just picking the notes. One part of the sound is producing the chord part, the other the 'bass guitar' sounding part. For this particular sound I had the Polyensemble section set with the F, L and M sliders at the halfway point,

the H staying at zero. On the Envelope Generator the attack was full up and the decay halfway, the sustain at zero.

Because of the way that notes come in it appears to change the texture, and there's a slight wah with the sound – not like a wah-wah, but much more subtle, a very animated sound. In fact this setting is so good I'll probably end up using it for a lot of other things, it's a really beautiful harmonium sound. You can play pretty low down with this setting too, I think I used a first inversion C in there somewhere which didn't sound bad at all.

On *Hoping Love Will Last* from the album I used the guitar synth to introduce the piece, a long note at the beginning, with the nylon-string guitar joining it after a short time. The effect is a bit like a combination of soprano sax and an oboe (maybe even smoother than oboe, like a cor anglais). Before Randy Crawford's voice comes in I use the synth, which sounds like an orchestra at that point. Then the track moves to the guitar synth by itself, and then we brought in real strings, the synth on a sort of string sound. The whole thing blended very well together, and we ended up with something like a 40-piece string section, part of it being the guitar synth's string sound marrying totally with the real strings.



Another device which I used on the record was the *EBow*, which you may be familiar with. As far as I'm concerned you can't get enough sustain – the nice thing about the *EBow*, and the Roland guitar synth for that matter, is that the sound you've got is *there*, it's not just one of those accidental processes like feedback, where the effect will just hit on certain notes and depend on where you're standing. On *Icarus Ascending* I use the *EBow* way behind Richie's voice, and if you listen to the notes they're totally continuous – it's all on one string with the guitar going through fuzz and echo.

Back to the guitar synth: obviously with anything there are always points you can criticise – mostly things that you would like to do, but which just take time. But there are a couple I'd point out: it

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would be nice, without having to have an external synthesiser, to be able to get a portamento effect, so that you could play those big chords and they'd swoop too. Also, a lot of the time you have to watch out for the input level of what you're doing, because the sound that comes off the thing is very powerful; I found that often I would have to halve volume settings everywhere in order for it not to distort. And the synth does sound a lot better when you're using things like echo – I was using a Roland amp which has their Chorus setting on it, giving you a kind of harmoniser or DDL type sound, putting the note slightly 'out of tune' with

itself. It does complement the synth very well – I think without the Chorus and echo it is a bit bland.

More generally, though, provided you sort out a good repertoire of sounds before you start using it live or in the studio, you can't go far wrong – if you expect it to do the earth it won't. I think it's madness to go out and spend the money before it's something with which you're totally happy. But it doesn't fit into certain styles of guitar playing; for example I know that Mike Rutherford tried it out (this was after I'd left the band), and he said, 'Oh, I'm not that keen, I don't think they've really got it together.' And I said, 'Oh really?' I think it's all down to the taste of

the individual player. If you *are* into gadgets – and there are very few guitarists who aren't, despite the way they may reject synthesisers – then you'll be interested. I've got no time for die-hard attitudes, people should be encouraged to develop things. It's a question of having an open enough mind to try it out and not going in with that: 'Not another one' cynicism. Because one in a hundred is really going to be very good.

rrp: £1,549.20/\$2,595

Steve Hackett was guitarist with Genesis until June 1977, when he left to pursue a solo career. He has recorded two solo albums, Voyage Of The Acolyte and Please Don't Touch.