

The amp that invented modern rock – with the help of Jimmy Page and Jeff Beck

# Marshall 1959 Super Lead reissue head £999

Marshall's original flagship returns in improved reissue specification, blows our minds and sets off a car alarm or two... by Nick Guppy

In the annals of rock history there are only a few amplifiers that can claim to have had a significant effect on the development of rock guitar. And without any doubt, Marshall's model 1959 Super Lead 'Plexi' amplifier is one of – if indeed not the – most influential collections of resistors, capacitors, wire and valves ever to have a guitar plugged into it.

It's relatively common knowledge that early Marshall amps were copied from (or if you prefer, inspired by) the Fender tweed range. The 1959's circuit was very similar to the tweed Twin; the earliest models used KT66s (a British version of the 6L6), although in 1966, after about a year of production, these were changed for EL34s, which Marshall has stuck with more or less ever since. Fender's 4 x 10 Bassman model may have also been the inspiration for the separate head and

cab arrangement we've come to know as the stack. It's open to conjecture, but you can see the logic: make a bigger Bassman with 12-inch drivers, discover the resulting combo is too heavy to lift off the ground, put the amp and speakers into separate boxes, and then add another cab for even more volume.

Looking back it seems almost too simple and naive, but at the time it was commonplace for whole bands (including singers!) to plug into a Vox AC30. So, the power and speaker concept which Marshall and designer Ken Bran came up with was a revolution. And in the hands of guitar players like Jimmy Page, Paul Kossoff and Jeff Beck, the 1959 made major waves in the way the electric guitar was being used.

Initially, everyone was playing Gibsons. The higher output humbucking pickups of these guitars made amps easier to overdrive (remember, there were no pedals back then), and no-one would have been seen dead with a Strat... until the UK arrival of a certain James Marshall Hendrix. Jimi's Super Lead/Stratocaster combination, and what he played with it, fundamentally changed rock guitar almost overnight. A decade later, Van Halen rekindled the flame in

danger of being snuffed out by synth pop, and once again it was the Super Lead which was responsible for Eddie's famous 'brown sound'. This then, is the amp that's shaped most of the classic rock guitar sounds we still use as benchmarks today.

After a self-imposed hiatus thanks to some interfering Euro legislation, Marshall's vintage reissue series is back, and this is the new improved version. "We could have done what was needed to comply with the new regulations and got the amps shipping again as quickly as possible, but instead we decided it was time to re-evaluate things," explains Marshall's Paul Heyhoe. "We wanted to get as close to the authentic tones as we could, and we brought in a lot of amps to listen to – including some from the States. After a lot of listening and arguing, we ended up with an amp that really delivers that famous 'Plexi' tone better than ever."

This 'reissued reissue' certainly looks the part. The pre-JCM800 style cab with its small-grain vinyl and gold piping is perfectly presented, and the painted Perspex control panel that gave this amp its nickname is exactly the right colour.

Inside the birch ply cabinet there's a solid welded-corner steel chassis,

## MARSHALL 1959 SUPER LEAD REISSUE HEAD

PRICE: £999

ORIGIN: UK

TYPE: All-valve two channel Class AB head with solid state rectification

OUTPUT: 100W RMS

VALVES: Three ECC83/12AX7 preamp, four EL34 power amp

DIMENSIONS: 250 (h) x 640 (w) x 240mm (d)

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 14/30

CABINET: Birch ply

CHANNELS: Two, non-switching

CONTROLS: Normal volume, high treble volume, bass, mid, treble and presence

ADDITIONAL FEATURES:

Series effects loop with level and bypass switch

OPTIONS: None

RANGE OPTIONS: In the same series comes the 2203 head (£950), the 1987X head (£804), the 1962 'Bluesbreaker' combo (£1,038), the JTM45 head (£784) and the 2203ZW Zakk Wylde signature model (£1,023)

Marshall Amplification  
www.marshallamps.com

### MARSHALL 1959 SUPER LEAD TEST RESULTS

Build Quality	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

**WE LIKED:** The classic 'Plexi' brown sound, with extra versatility from the effects loop  
**WE DISLIKED:** It would have been nice to see a plated board on this reissue



Using a 'jumper' lead can help you tame this beast



The heart of the Plexi, where rock guitar tone originated

## The rivals

Laney GH100L £499

Orange AD140TC

£998

Cornford MK50H £1,199

Orange's AD140TC has a similar vintage vibe, with the versatility of two channels and preamp gain controls. Cornford's MK50 doesn't have the sheer muscle, but continues to excite with one of the best rock guitar tones you'll ever hear and superb point-to-point build quality. Laney's big hitter is easy on the pocket, but still packs a serious wallop of high energy tone

## The 1959 is massively loud, louder than almost anything we've ever heard and way, way too loud for a night down the Dog & Duck. Every player should experience it at least once

which holds a single-sided PCB. It's not through plated, however, and Marshall could have pushed the boat out a little more for this amp and gone for a plated board. All the valves are chassis mounted, and there's a fair amount of hand-wiring involved as a result. It's generally neat and tidy, although the heater wires could have had a few more twists.

The 1959 is a two-channel, non-switching design, but it's not the clean/distortion arrangement that's common today. Instead there are two differently voiced preamps ('normal' and 'high treble') wired in parallel, with separate volume controls and two pairs of high and low sensitivity inputs. The bass, mid and treble tone stack works on both channels, as does the presence control.

On the rear of the amp, the only change from the original spec is the inclusion of an effects loop with switchable levels and a true bypass: with the loop bypassed, the amp operates exactly like an original.

**SOUNDS:** What does a Super Lead sound like? Well, taken individually, both channels are out of step with the way we expect a modern amp to sound. The normal channel is somewhat bass heavy, and needs the treble and mid controls at or near 10 to achieve a good balance. The high treble channel is sharp enough to cut glass; even with treble and presence at zero it's still

toppy, and the reissue captures both tones just right.

However, by using a patch lead to 'jumper' both channels together you can find an ideal balance for any guitar. If you're plugged into the high treble channel's input one, the patch lead goes from high treble input two to normal input one. Using a jumper, the amp's two volume controls are now the primary tone controls as well – simply turn up one for highs and the other for lows. No master volume means that if you want distortion you have to wind things up a lot, and that's when the famous Plexi mid-range bark appears: plug in a Les Paul and all those classic Led Zep and Free riffs are there instantly, with total authenticity.

The price for this fabulous distortion tone, however, is volume. The 1959 is massively loud, louder than almost anything we've ever heard and way, way over the top for a Friday night down the Dog & Duck. Even with just one Celestion Greenback-loaded cab, the string balance, sustain, dynamic response and punch at maximum output is nothing less than awesome – every player should experience it at least once.

So, how do you tame this monster? Plugging in a pedal like Marshall's Bluesbreaker boosts the front end and makes it easier to distort, but with this extra gain you barely get to nudge the volume controls off of zero. If you use a jumper, that's not going to be enough

to get full command of the available tonal range. Our favourite setup is to use a stompbox in conjunction with an output attenuator like Marshall's Powerbrake. This will give you complete control at any volume, and with a little work the sound really is superb – instant Eddie, Kossoff, Beck, Page or Hendrix.

## Verdict

If you're in the market for a Plexi, you already know why you need one. Our best advice is that buying this reissued version makes a lot more sense than shelling out stupid money for an original, especially as many vintage amps are 'modified' and often need expert attention to make them safe and reliable. Plexis were favourites for this as well – the most common changes included effects loops and internal jumpering, as well as resistor/capacitor swaps on the preamp valves to increase gain and alter frequency response.

In its original spec, however, this reissue is as close to the famous 'brown sound' as we've ever heard, and the effects loop adds just enough versatility to let this piece of history continue to earn its keep in the modern market. This is the amp that was used to invent modern rock guitar, and for all those classic sounds it's still the original and still the best. **A**

**Marshall 1959 Super Lead reissue head**

Guitarist RATING

