



Marshall MG102FX, MG100HFX, MG30FX & MG15FX £348, £264, £169 & £137

Marshall's MG range receives a long-awaited revamp that includes some smart new features, not least the provision of a dedicated footswitch for four programmable sounds... *by Simon Bradley*

What we want to know

- 1 So, new MGs. What new features are there?**
Quite a few, not least an innovative method of storing and recalling settings into four patches. There's also the FDD button, a load of effects and, as we'll demonstrate, some great tones on offer.
- 2 Who are these amps aimed at?**
Prices are reasonable enough to assume that these are fancy beginner's amps, but judging by the premise and specifications it could be that players of any experience will benefit from taking an MG for a road test.
- 3 Do they sound like Marshalls?**
From our own sound tests, we'd say a qualified yes – don't expect a cranked Plexi response. Hearing Doug Aldrich and Kerry King blast through the 100-watter at the NAMM show, however, confirmed the credibility of the sounds.

Marshall's MG series is fundamentally important to the company. The entry level product, it sells in big numbers and is therefore many a budding player's first hands-on introduction to the brand, holding the potential to make or break a lifelong love affair with the most revered amp company of all time.

When we first reviewed the MGs back in September 2002 we were very impressed, and since then, despite the growth in digital modelling technology, the series has usually punched above its weight due to some innovative features such as Frequency Dependent Damping (FDD) and a contour control, not to mention the onboard effects. 2009 heralds the latest evolution: MG4, a totally new, completely redesigned range that sticks vehemently to an analogue design for the amp tones, meaning no digital recreations of amps of yore whatsoever. As the company says: "We live in an age of cloning where many amplifiers are attempting to copy each other. The new MG range produces the type of tone other amplifiers can only try to imitate."

Saucer of milk? Perhaps, but given that there's a Marshall simulation in every modelling amp ever made, you can see where the big M is coming from. Time to have a look at four newbies then...

MG102FX & MG100HFX

The 100-watt head and 2 x 12 combo are kept company at the top of the range by a 1 x 12

combo version (the MG101FX) and they all offer the same selection of features.

Perhaps the most important, that's relevant across the board, is Marshall's Stompware technology, which enables you to program and store – yes, program! – up to four sounds that can be composed from contrasting effects and different amp settings – including gain and EQ levels: four separate sounds, available instantly at your feet.

The key to the system is the Stompware footswitch that's included with all MG amps down to the MG50FX (and is available as an optional extra for use with the smaller amps too). Setting and storing a sound is simple thanks to the provision of a store button and Stompware can also recall other specific settings: whether the FX loop is in or out, the damping selection and so on. Even the onboard tuner can be assigned to a patch: neat.

The footswitch's LED and status panel show you which effects and features you have for each of the four patches. While digital modelling amps offer many more presets than this, hands up who actually uses more than four core amp tones at a single gig anyway! In that respect, each new MG of 50

The Rivals

The Line 6 Spider III 150 head (£274) is an excellent unit that offers over 250 artist and 150 song-based programmes into 36 user presets and supported by all sorts of add-ons: this arachnid has it all. Laney's LX range of effects-loaded amps is topped by the LX120H head (£229.95), a 120-watt monster that provides a pair of channels alongside a decent choice of DSP effects. With a total of four preamp modes plus a wide selection of 24-bit digital effects, Kustom's QUAD100 head (£209) represents excellent value: the associated 412 cab goes for £279.

watts or more is genuinely giggable in a band context from a practicality standpoint at the very least.

Each amp comes out of the box loaded with a quartet of factory settings, but changing them around or tailoring them to your specific requirements takes no more than a matter of minutes. This may seem a very familiar configuration, but remember where in the market these amps are aimed and that there are no pesky amp, cab and mic models to choose, select, tailor and store. It truly is just a case of getting a sound you like and storing it. The patches are





kept in the amp's memory, rather than that of the footswitch, and it's also possible to set the amp to manual mode rather than preset, which will strip its functions down to basic channel switching.

Other features shared by the 100-watt combo and head include a mono effects loop, a 3.5mm mini-jack line in intended for use with a CD, mp3 or other audio media player, and a line out for headphones/direct hook ups.

The MG100HFX possesses a pair of speaker outs and even the power switch is new: it's a circular in/out affair rather than the more traditional illuminated rocker switch.

The effects are more spread out across the front panel of these bigger amps, with the chorus, phaser and flanger chosen via a rotary control, while the delay and reverb have their own level pots. There's also a tap tempo function for use with the delay and each can be turned off completely with one of three switches.

Elsewhere the configuration is familiar from the more contemporary Marshall amps. As a solid-state, two-channel affair the three-way EQ is shared by the clean (green) and crunch (red) channels, with the latter also possessing an additional overdrive function that adds gain. A single volume control is also shared, with an overall master the perfect way to ensure your volume onstage or in a rehearsal is where it needs to be without it being necessary to alter your carefully balanced settings.

One omission is that of the once lauded contour control, a



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feature that enabled you to effortlessly scoop a high-gain tone without it losing any punch or drive.

As recompense, the 100- and 50-watters provide a switchable damping option that subtly alters the way in which the power section reacts to your playing. When switched out the amp is designed to feel akin to a classic Marshall, while flicking it on gives a more modern, compressed response. We'll elaborate in the sounds section, and you can use the same button to switch between the aforementioned preset and manual modes.

Speakers in the MG102FX comprise a pair of Custom 12-inch coils and the chassis, although hardly setting any

standards for excellence, is certainly tidy and well put-together.

Sounds

Even a quick blast shows that the bigger amps have plenty of headroom and versatility to their tones and, once you start getting deeper, you can't help but be impressed by the choices that are available.

Played cleanly, the tones are pleasing, though do have an element of squareness that no solid-state amp seems to be able to shake, compared with a quality valve amp at least. They benefit hugely from the

The Rivals

One of the classic effects-laden 2 x 12 combos is the **Roland Jazz Chorus JC-120** (£821). Boasting a beautifully lush chorus and vibrato, plus reverb and a distortion of sorts, it doesn't get cleaner – or better – than this. The space age **Kustom WAV212** (£499) provides for tube-driven preamp channels plus boosts and a wealth of digital effects, while the cheap-as-chips yet fully-loaded **Behringer V-Ampire LX210** (£271), described as a 'digital guitar modelling workstation', is worth a look.

The Rivals

The new **Vox VT** range straddles the 'proper amp/learning tool' divide perfectly and the 30-watt option, the **VT30** (£199), is big enough to sound great without being too overpowering. The almost illegally dirty **Randall RX35DM** (£199) uses a 12-inch speaker to provide a genuinely huge modern drive that's easily embellished with the choice of 15 onboard effects. Equally well proportioned is **Laney's LX35D** (£139.95), a 35-watter loaded with a 10-inch custom speaker and DSP effects, not to mention the positively mumm-frightening tattoo graphics and dollops of 'tude.

on-board effects, with the ability to marry both a delay and reverb with the modulation effects. Using a Strat's fourth position the reverb is deep and the delay, although not offering quite as lengthy a feedback as we'd have liked, is simple to control. The chorus shimmers, the phaser throbs and the flanger... well... flanges. We find it hard to conceive of any player not enjoying the tones: we played for 20 minutes before remembering we had some evaluating to do. Interestingly, Doug Aldrich did pretty much the same thing while demoing the amps at this January's NAMM show. He had to apologise for getting into it so much – no moans here Doug!

The sparkly high-end is transferred to both drive settings of the red channel which on the face of it may come across as too bright, but it's these frequencies that really help you get heard in a band mix: woolly just won't do when there are cymbals crashing all around you. In this mode we're in classic rock territory: some great Jimi-isms here, not least with the effects pumping.

Flicking the overdrive channel offers two further gain stages and it's here that the damping feature, a subtle one at the best of times, comes into its own. It really does alter the feel of the amp, and with the



damping engaged, a higher gain setting and the middle reduced, there's a tone that'd be cool for modern metal styles.

The preamp isn't ultimately as dirty as you'd think, though perhaps we've become used to unrealistic levels of gain in some new amps – it's worth stating for the record that good live tones are invariably cleaner than you might think. One criticism is that the amp does suffer some background noise, even set clean.

Moving to the MG100HFX and MG 4 x 12A cab presents a bigger, punchier version of everything thanks to the increased cubic volume and four speakers. We hooked the head up to a couple of different yet more robust cabs and found the head sounded even better: maybe users should subsequently consider tracking down a second-hand 1960A?

MG30FX & MG15FX

These smaller amps possess pretty much the same feature list, but for a few differences...

There's no specific damping switch; Marshall describes the feature as 'onboard', and the delay effect is included with the trio of modulation options on a four segment rotary control that also incorporates an off setting. Impressively, the reverb remains independent and, as you'd hope at this end of the market, there are distinct lines in and out provided.

As with all new MG amps, each effect has its own section throughout the circumference of the pot's rotation, with the faster and deeper setting for each to be found the further clockwise you go within the specific segment.

It seems a shame that the Stompware footswitch isn't included here, even though we are sure that its exclusion is part of the plan to keep these lower-powered amps low in price as well. To get the most out of these amps, the footswitch is essential and – although it's available as an optional extra for just £39.

Both amps are extremely lightweight, which is good, with the MG30FX loaded with a 10-inch Custom speaker, and the MG15FX an eight-inch.

All combo cabinets are fully close-backed, which will certainly aid projection, and the front panel layout is such that even yolk-encrusted newbies will find their way around.

Sounds

Both of these smaller amps sound impressive at lower volumes, which is vital at this end of the market, and even with the volume on just about zero the metal tones via headphones of both amps will keep you playing for ages. The line in works adequately and, for obtaining a wealth of tone with which to learn, either would be perfect.

The clean tones are satisfying and unsurprisingly we find the 30 to be slightly better all round, no doubt due to the bigger speaker. The jury's still out as to whether the 30 and 15 would have benefited from slightly higher gain levels – we're erring towards suggesting that they would – we can only recommend that you make your own mind up.

Verdict

As far as the versatility of the range goes, we're blown away. The provision of the elegantly simple Stompware footswitch (albeit not included as standard across the whole range) makes the new MG range serious contenders at the lower end of the market.

They're not the cheapest options out there when compared to their relevant peers, nor do they groan under the weight of amp, cab, and effects models. However, that classic white logo and gold livery still does something unexplainable to many guitarists and, if you're in the market for either your first head and cab or even very first amp of any denomination, the MG15FX and MG100HFX are strong contenders.

All four amps we've looked at here provide excellent effects and, with four different sounds upon which to base your tones, there's a lot to get to grips with. A good range of clean and dirty tones, plus blissfully easy-to-use, good sounding effects – there's little doubt the new MGs outshine their predecessors. **G**

The Rivals

The 15-watt version of the **Line 6 Spider III** (£82) packs a great tone and selection of features into an extremely portable package. Four user channels and a modest yet useable effects selection are just some of the highlights. **Peavey's Vypyr** range mixes models of specific amps with an impressive range of bespoke effects recreations. The **15** (£85) dispenses with stompbox models, but its uses are wide and varied. **Fender's Super Champ XD** (£249) isn't cheap, but offers real all-tube Champ tones along with 16 classic DSP effects for those inspiring fifties and sixties moments. It's a loud amp too, even though rated at just 15 watts.



Store up to four tones with help from the Stompware footswitch