

GEAR Bench Test



Marshall Vintage Modern 2266 Head and 425A Cabinet

TESTED BY JUDE GOLD

WHEN MARSHALL AMPLIFICATION UNVEILED THE new JVM Series 100-watt tube head at this year's winter NAMM convention, most people were impressed, but few were surprised. Even with its whopping four channels, 28 knobs, 12 possible gain voicings, and MIDI capability, the high-gain tour de force seemed a logical, even predictable extension of Marshall's previous flagship—the three-channel JCM 2000 TSL-100. It seems the industry has grown to expect such full-featured triumphs of amp design from the iconic British amp builder.

The bigger surprise was the *other* amp Marshall released around the same time—the bone-head-simple Vintage Modern.

If you trace the steady and linear evolution of Marshall amp designs from basic, early-'60s,

Fender Bassman-inspired circuits to sophisticated, stacked-PC-board, multi-channel über amps, the Vintage Modern is a stylistic U-turn that no one saw coming, because it's entirely old-school—at least on the surface. With just one channel, it has more in common with classic Marshalls (and subsequent reissues) than its cousins in the JVM and JCM lines. The only thing slightly confusing about this amp is its name. Many people—including, at press time, one major online retailer—erroneously assume "Vintage Modern" describes the eras of tone the amp produces. Actually, the first word refers to the amp's sounds, the second to the slick technology and modern conveniences that grant you easy access to those sounds.

Refreshingly sparse by 2007 standards, the Vintage Modern's brushed-aluminum faceplate has only eight knobs, two push-switches, and a throwback, early-'60s-style block pilot light that glows in calming indigo. Yet despite its classic look, the amp boasts several contemporary features. These include a bypassable series effects loop (switchable between rack gear and stompbox input levels), footswitchable Dynamic Range and reverb, a powerful Mid Boost switch that's perfectly voiced for adding mass to single-coils, and last but certainly not least, my favorite feature—the tandem preamp controls. Labeled Detail and Body, the former adds sparkle and sizzle by goosing the high-end gain above 400Hz, and the latter adds rumble and spine by boosting the low end. A convenient, revoiced incarnation of "jumpered" Marshall Super Lead volume controls, this pair of knobs allows you to sculpt a wide range of sonic shapes, and the number of variations is quadrupled when you factor in all possible Mid Boost/Dynamic Range combinations.

The real news flash with the Vintage Modern, though, is that it represents the first time



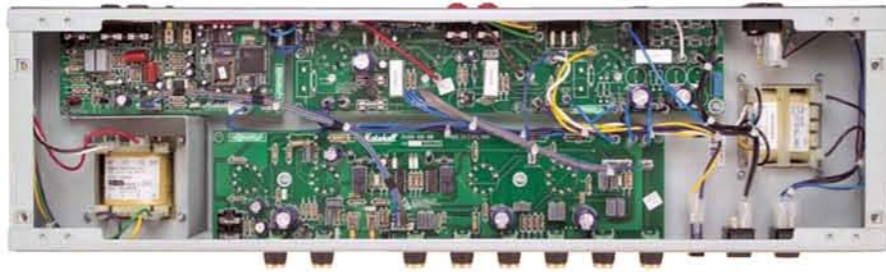
HUH?

The letters in KT66 stand for **kinkless tetrode**. "This tube was developed by the M-O Valve Company of the U.K. in the late 1930s to get rid of the 6L6 'kink' in the response curve," writes Groove Tubes founder Aspen Pittman in *The Tube Amp Book*. "This is why the mids of this tube are smoother and more linear than those of a 6L6 or 5881."



SPECS Marshall Amplification, (631) 390-8737; marshallamps.com	
PRICE	\$1,900 retail/\$1,350 street, head; \$1,390 retail/\$969 street, cabinet
CHANNELS	One
KNOBS	Reverb, Master Volume, Presence, Bass, Middle, Treble, Detail, Body
SWITCHES	Power, Standby, Dynamic Range, Mid Boost
REVERB	Digital-modeled plate
FOOTSWITCH	Two-button (Dynamic Range and Reverb)
POWER	50 watts
TUBES	Two KT66 power tubes, four 12AX7 preamp tubes
UTILITIES	Bi-level (-10dB/+4dB) series effects loop, loop level and bypass switches, 8/16Ω impedance switch, two speaker outputs
SPEAKERS	Four 25-watt 12" Celestion G12C
WEIGHT	39.2 lbs, head 81.2 lbs, cabinet (with casters)
KUDOS	Old-school tube tones, new-school conveniences. Wonderfully responsive to playing dynamics.
CONCERNS	Reverb voiced a little on the dark side. Footswitch outdated.

GEAR Marshall



Circuit city—vintage stops and modern begins when you peer inside this new Marshall's chassis. The microchips (upper left) crunch numbers for the amp's digital reverb.

since the very early '70s that Marshall has released a production amp running on the big **kinkless tetrode** [see Huh? sidebar] glass bulbs known as KT66 power tubes. Slightly raunchy at the core with plenty of tinsel around the edges, the creamy KT66 overdrive tone blooms beautifully the more you open the throttle on these bottles, and is less angry sounding (though a tad less articulate) than that of EL34s—the go-to output tubes of Marshalls for the last 30 or so years. The result is a magically forgiving, warm 'n' fuzzy grind evocative of Hendrix, Bluesbreakers/Cream-era Clapton, and, suiting the amp's, ahem, *deep purple* Tolex exterior, early Ritchie Blackmore (not to mention other masters of '60s-era KT66 Marshalls). Coupled with the matching cabinet's four 12" Celestion G12Cs (the same speakers found in Marshall's recent Super 100JH Limited Edition Jimi Hendrix reissue stack), these tubes have a charming sag—a natural compression—that makes overdriven guitar parts sit nicely in the mix.

Set the Vintage Modern's Dynamic Range switch to High, crank the Master and preamp

knobs, and the amp foams over with heaps of organic distortion and musical feedback—all at fairly sane volume levels. It's thrilling to conjure this Hendrix-like response without turning people's skulls to pulp. (For a bump in power—and for an extra \$200 retail—consider the 100-watt Vintage Modern head. The amp is also offered as a 50-watt 2x12 combo for \$2,300 retail/\$1,649 street.)

One of the most satisfying guitar tones I've gotten in recent years was with this half-stack in a large rehearsal hall, facing slightly away from the band, and echoing off the walls. It filled the room with a magnificent 3-D rock roar. Every lick I threw at it seemed like it was written for this amp—from Van Halen's "Unchained," to the Stones' "Honky Tonk Women," and U2's "Beautiful Day" to cleaner fare such as Zepp's "Ramble On."

The big bonus on the Vintage Modern is while it's officially billed as a single-channel amp, the footswitchable Dynamic Range option makes it, in effect, a one-and-a-half-channel amp. Kicking the Range from Low to High adds an extra 12AX7, and, consequently, a



"When the High Dynamic Range is switched in, an extra 12AX7 is added to the signal path," says Vintage Modern designer Steve Dawson. "Both sides of this valve are paralleled for better noise performance. The signal is conditioned to give more available gain and a preset boost, which is optimized to work with the guitar's volume control."

volume boost and significant gain increase. If Marshall had given this hot-rodded setting its own level control, the amp could easily pass as a two-channel rig.

Every other page of the Vintage Modern's manual, it seems, reminds you to use your guitar volume to control the tone and distortion level—and for good reason. Dynamically, this touch-sensitive tone machine is among the most responsive of high-gain amps on the market. Its sounds are extremely tactile, as the amp reacts differently to variances in picking/plucking attack. The clean sounds are there if you just lower your guitar's Volume knob.

My qualms with the Vintage Modern were few. I liked the low-maintenance aspect of the reverb being digital—bouncy stages don't cause loud spring crashes—but found it voiced so dark that when the rest of the band was playing, it wasn't easy to tell if it was engaged or not. I'm not pining for Dick Dale sounds, but a slightly brighter reflection would be welcome, as would footswitch LED indicators for 'verb and Dynamic Range, and a button for loop bypass. The footswitch is the only Vintage Modern component that seems at all unrefined by 2007 Marshall standards. In comparison, the JVM got a programmable six-button/LED floor control that does everything but trigger flash pots and check your e-mail, and it does it all through a standard 1/4" instrument cable. The Vintage Modern got stuck with a clunky, '90s JCM-style, two-button, hard-wired tip/ring/sleeve-driven jobby.

Some players may view the Vintage Modern as a nostalgia amp, but with a bold ambition to unite the better parts of two disparate eras, it represents much more. It's a loud call to arms imploring all guitarists—particularly newbies from the instant-gratification, digital modeling, Ritalin generation—to take the torch passed on from Jeff Beck, Eddie Van Halen, The Edge, Frank Marino, and other full-spectrum guitar gods, and learn the timeless art of actually *playing* an amp. 🎸



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