

Marshall JCM2000 DSL50 Head

WE'VE DUG THE PAST, we've dug the present – now TGM brandishes its crystal ball at the baby in the brand-new Marshall JCM2000 range that promises so much, the 50-watt DSL head. Review by John Seabury

The new JCM2000 series supersedes Marshall's JCM900s as the Brit company's standard range of chunky all-valve amps, marrying modern assets such as channel switching, FX-loop and reverb with the traditional roast beef of EL34-powered 50- and 100-watt outputs. The twin channel Dual Super Lead (DSL) heads – of which the 50-watt DSL50 is reviewed here – are in the shops

FACTFILE

MARSHALL JCM2000 DSL50 RRP: £584

UK-made, dual-channel all-valve head giving 50-watts RMS from two Svetlana EL34s. Preamp is a channel-switching master volume design using four ECC83 valves. Features: spring reverb, mode and voicing switches, single input, level-switchable series FX-loop, multiple speaker outlets for 4/8/16Ω operation.

Controls: 'Classic Gain' channel has gain and volume, plus clean/crunch switch; 'Ultra Gain' channel has gain and volume, plus lead 1/lead 2 switch. Shared 4-band EQ (presence, treble, middle, bass) with deep and tone shift switches. Separate reverb level control for each channel. Power and standby switches. Sockets for single button, LED-equipped channel-changing footswitch (supplied) and for optional reverb muting footswitch.

Options: PED801 reverb footswitch £16. DSL100 (100-watt head) £609; combos and three-channel JCM2000 amps coming later in 1998.

Contact: Marshall Amplification, Denbigh Road, Bletchley, Milton Keynes MK1 1DQ. ☎ 01908-375411.

now, while combo versions will follow shortly.

Tastes have changed in the years since the JCM900s ruled the roost – Marshall themselves admit that the range 'had reached the end of its shelf life' – and one of their main aims with the JCM2000 series is to offer not just the usual menu of medium gain lead and crunchy rhythm but also fat, bass-heavy distortion, instant scooped-mid thrash tones and big, crisp, open-sounding clean tones.

The DSL50, then, is a full sized (29.5" wide) head with modern Marshall styling, with regular 1960 cabs making up the 'matching' 4x12"s. The DSL50 (identical to the 100-watter, apart from the obvious) has a single input, followed by two footswitchable channels – Classic Gain and Ultra Gain – each with its own gain, volume, reverb level and mode switch (clean/crunch and lead 1/lead 2, respectively).

The shared 4-band EQ consists of presence (a power amp control), treble, middle and bass, plus two voicing options: a Deep switch (another power amp control) 'increases bottom end thud without muddying your sound', according to Marshall, while Tone Shift 'reconfigures the tone network for brutal metal tones'. Eeek.

Round the back lurk the sockets for the supplied

channel-changing footswitch – a sturdy metal unit – and the optional reverb muting footswitch, plus the level switchable series FX-loop, and triple speaker outlets complete with impedance switch.

Marshall's devotion to heavy duty construction remains much in evidence

Rawk, crunch or even twang: the JCM2000 DSL50 is an impressive all-rounder



CHECK OUT...

Marshall defined the 50-watt valve head in the mid-'60s, and blimmin' everyone piled in. Now loads of firms offer footswitchable dual-channel heads with reverb and switchable voicing and/or modes – most of the models listed below are available in 100-watt versions, too...

Starting with the home-grown competition, **TRACE ELLIOT** have their capable Speed Twin H50 (£799); **contact** Trace Elliot ☎ 01621-851851.

LANEY's LH50R costs a disarmingly modest £449, with the simpler GH50L at a mere £439 and the full-featured VH100R

at £699; **contact** Laney ☎ 01384-633821.

Among American brands, **MESA/BOOGIE** offer the compact DC-5 (£1095); **contact** Rocky Road ☎ 0181-450-6666.

SOLDANO's impressive Hot Rod 50+XL costs £1549; **contact** Class A Distribution ☎ 01392-494988.

RIVERA have the versatile £999 55-watt K55; **contact** Creative Distribution ☎ 01623-423330.

And **PEAVEY** offer their £529 Classic 50; **contact** Peavey ☎ 01536-461234.

And don't forget that **MARSHALL** also offer the JCM600, a compact 60-watter for £489...

with a birch ply cab, sturdy handle, rivetted corners and a seam welded steel chassis, while the valves and big transformers are protected by a fretcloth covered front baffle and steel rear grille. The fascia and rear panel are of the familiar anodised aluminium, the reverb is a long spring Accutronics. At 38lb the amp is predictably heavy, but it balances well when carried.

The valves are two Svetlana EL34s (see *Back To The Future*) and four ECC83s, all mounted vertically. Modern electrical engineering comes into play within the chassis; the circuitry could be described as 'modular', with six printed circuit boards of different sizes and shapes mounted in different planes. The control pots, jack sockets and valve bases are all PCB-mounted, though the size and specification of each board is carefully matched to the weight and voltage it will carry. Importantly, the EL34 valve bases are supported by

a folded steel tray, bolted to the chassis and also carrying the top quality, double-sided power amp PCB. There's easy access to two preset pots and test connections, so an amp technician can check and reset the output stage bias after valve replacement.

Note that the PCBs are well secured, while each control pot is secured to the front panel by a metal nut; no hidden compromises here. The various integrated circuits, transistors and light dependent resistors are for the switching, reverb and FX-loop functions; 'all the DSL's tone forming and distortion circuitry is pure valve', Steve Grindrod, the amp's designer, confirms.

● SOUNDS

The DSL is meant to be like having two vintage-style Plexi Super Lead heads in one box, with the added boon of reverb, voicing options and extra gain. Thus you can go



Looks like a Marshall, dunnit?

beyond those simple yet superbly clear and crunchy-sounding early designs to JCM800-style overdrive and hot-rodded solo tones with mid-boosted ultra high-gain tones, all with wide band dynamics – no wasps or jam jars in sight.

In clean mode, the Classic Gain channel aims to cover the clean, natural valve tones and controlled crunch of a 1959 Super Lead head, with crunch mode offering that 'grinding, full-on JCM800 Master Volume clout'. On Ultra Gain, Lead 1 is said to take you from an open-sounding high gain crunch, similar to a hot-rodded JCM800 2203, while Lead 2 offers 'a mid boosted tone with an even higher gain response and superb dynamics.' If even half of that's true, we're in for a treat...

And so it proves. I auditioned the amp with a standard 1960A cab loaded with Celestion G12T-75s. Rather than testing everything in logical order, I dived straight in with Lead 2, then pushed a few buttons as I went along to see what else was available – and the fact that I played continuously for over an hour before making any notes is a tribute to the variety, authenticity and sheer number of sounds available.

The Deep switch delivers on its promise, instantly doubling the size – half stack to full stack! Tone shift provides instant gratification, too. And these facilities were in addition to good basic sounds: Lead 1 gives very satisfying rock lead with great tone and responsive distortion. Lead 2 pumps out the expected high-gain sustain and rich harmonics but with extra percussive chunk for mega-heavy rhythm work plus tuneful feedback.



BACK TO THE FUTURE... WITH EL34S



Marshall's chief valve amp designer, Steve Grindrod: 'I'm very confident in these new EL34s'

Several years ago, Marshall had to forsake their traditional choice of output valve, the EL34, and rework their power amps to use the 5881 (similar to the 6L6 used in many Fenders and Boogies). 'At that time, there just weren't any good sounding, reliable EL34's available in bulk', explains Marshall's chief valve amp designer Steve Grindrod. 'I wasn't willing to build unreliability into our

amps, so we had to change over to the 5881; yes, there was a difference in sound, although we worked hard to get the most Marshall-like tones.'

Now, though, the company are back in the comfortable position of designing their amps round EL34 output stages – thanks to plentiful supplies of the Russian-made Svetlana EL34, designed in conjunction with Marshall.

'Svetlana approached us and asked if there was anything they could make for us,' recalls Steve Grindrod. 'They weren't then making an EL34, so I quickly got out my data-sheets on the old Mullard EL34, a much respected design. After six months, they brought us the first batch; we did a lot of listening, tested thousands of samples, and made suggestions. We saw the Svetlana people again after another six months. This went on for two years, until we were happy. The result is the Svetlana EL34, which is as near as you'll get to an original Mullard, these days. And you'll notice that the JCM2000 amps don't have valve failure warning LEDs: that's how confident I am in these new EL34s.'

Lead 2 isn't the most transparent-sounding distortion, but it certainly rocks, and turns down at the guitar for a darker tone. Leaving the deep-switch out offers a splendidly poky mid-biased sound, and despite the generous gain you can still 'hang' treble notes above distorted chords. A Fender Strat sounds full bodied, while a humbucking Gibson is rich, raucous and toneful, with lengthy sustain and earthquake style feedback, should you feel the urge.

Switching back to classic gain brings a surprise: this amp starts at *really* clean settings. The low-gain clean mode is springy, toneful and bold, combining hard, twangy top end and tight, crystalline low string definition with a solid depth and percussive response that made you launch into powerful, clean instrumentals.

With the volume up and deep switch in there's plenty of chesty thump, while a wah-wah works a treat. Hendrix would have approved, no doubt. The reverb is generous, capable of a 'distant' effect without swamping clean channel attack, and background noise is low at all but extreme settings.

Against this there's some graunchy 'inter-modulation' distortion when you play clean three-note chords higher up the neck, with the notes interacting in a slightly crude way that you wouldn't get on, say, a low power, high quality combo from Boogie, Matchless or Fender. Steve Grindrod: 'The DSL's power amp is a simple design and is meant



Marshall's devotion to heavy duty construction remains much in evidence with a birch ply cab, sturdy handle, rivetted corners and a seam welded steel chassis

to rock, rather than sounding ultra sophisticated on crystal clean sounds'.

So to crunch settings. At higher gain in clean mode there's a mild, natural sounding overdrive with lots of ringing definition. Fat crunch is the province of the true crunch mode, which is superb, offering classic Free-type sounds: biting detail on powerful, full-bodied chords plus great sustain and tasty guitar tone. Marshall heaven!



Punch the Deep (l) and Tone Shift (r) buttons for extra lip-smacking EQ flavour

All in all, the DSL50 bungs out big, technicolour pop'n'rock tones with virtually any guitar – even if it's not always the last word in subtlety. There's prodigious volume on tap, though you might want to ease back on the bass and reverb at high sound levels.

Of course, there's an inherent difference in sound between the 50-watt and 100-watt versions, which comes out at higher volume. If you play loud and crave masses of clean headroom plus ultra-solid low end on heavy distortion settings, check out the DSL100; the DSL50 has a slightly more compressed bass, but there again, you can push it more easily. I tried the amp with Celestion Vintage 30s and the tone was even better, if creamier, with some of the G12T-75's brute force lost.

Oddities? Well, some players may miss an overall master volume. The only other feature that takes some getting used to occurs when you switch from clean to lead: the distortion sound takes a moment to build to its full volume. Also, when switching back, the clean channel's reverb signal is muted for a second or two. Steve

Grindrod: 'We were keen to avoid the situation – as on the JCM900s – where the reverb would "crash" when you switched back from lead to clean because of the loud distorted signal still reverberating around the reverb springs. And I felt strongly that the switching circuitry should not alter the DSL's tone in any way; given this aim, a momentary ducking of the volume level was a necessary minor compromise.'

VERDICT

You may never have heard of half the amps the DSL's handbook refers to, but you'll have no trouble getting a generous array of big, bold, toneful sounds out of this multi-voiced Marshall – and that's just as true of low-to-mid volumes as it is to proper stage levels. Just plug into a bog-standard 4x12" or two and you'll turn any guitar into a

surprisingly responsive and big-boned instrument. If the DSL50 were double the price it would still be well worth investigating, and I'd still look forward to hearing my guitars sound just as beefy in scale and tone.

A great do-it-all amp, then, which offers excellent value for money and quality fine-grained enough to satisfy all but the pickiest of home studio types. So, let's r-a-w-k... or crunch, or indeed twang. **G**