

Marshall DSL401 Guitar Amp

Gain is my middle name

by Mike Bieber

MENTION MARSHALL AMPS, AND THE FIRST THING THAT springs to mind is a wall of sound—the earth-moving backline of stacks that has helped define the sound of rock, from Cream and Hendrix, to Van Halen and Guns N' Roses. Marshall's first amp impact wasn't the classic Plexi-head, but rather the original combo used by Bluesbreaker-era Eric Clapton and many others. In fact, Marshall's combo beauties—from that classic Bluesbreaker model to those punchy, '70s-vintage master volume models, through the channel-switching JCM800s and JCM900s of more recent issue—have as rich and distinct a sonic stamp as their more famous big brothers. Marshall's newest all-tube combos, the 40-watt DSL401 and its 20-watt counterpart, the DSL201 (see sidebar) trace their lineage back to some of the most worshiped tone machines ever made.

Vintage Modern

The DSL401 is somewhat of a departure for Marshall. For starters, it features a quartet of EL84 output tubes, which are best known as key components in the classic Vox AC30 and AC15 tone. (They were, however, also found in some earlier Marshall combos.) The new mid- to low-power combos are designed to offer the classic Marshall crunch at a reasonable, club-friendly volume, with special emphasis on poweramp saturation. But the DSL's tonal personality extends beyond the overdrive: The DSL401 offers a big and warm clean tone that's among the sweetest Marshall has ever produced.

Modern Vintage

Vintage echoes aside, the DSL401 is every bit a modern workhorse. It's stacked with state-of-the-art features such as channel switching, reverb, a parallel effects loop, a direct-out jack with speaker emulation circuit (borrowed from Marshall's JMP-1 guitar preamp), and a very '90s high-gain preamp circuit in the overdrive channel. The overdrive channel features an additional gain mode (called OD2) that yields a ferocious 20-dB boost. As you would expect from anything Marshall, the DSL401 is built like a tank, with a thick, laminated pine cabinet and an aluminum chassis. Interestingly, the amp's back is what you might describe as

semi-open, with two perforated metal grilles attached to a wood panel completely shielding the components inside (having the tubes covered like this is now a safety requirement in many European countries).

Performance

The DSL401 was intended to be at home in any number of playing situations, while still remaining true to its lineage. Tested with a '57 Strat reissue, a 1959 Les Paul Junior, and a mid-'80s SG Custom, the Clean channel ably demonstrated the amp's versatility. So much for the ancient argument that Marshalls can't do the clean thing. With some tone control tweaking, the 401/Strat pairing delivered a warm, full-bodied, and glassy clean tone with excellent headroom that broke into solid crunch when Gain was pushed past 12 o'clock. Country and jazz players should appreciate the headroom, while rock players will dig the gorgeous, grinding spankiness that emerges as the amp is pushed harder into clipping. Surf rockers won't dig the DSL401's onboard reverb, which hardly approaches the depth and dwell of a classic surf-era Fender amp. The SG Custom's humbuckers drove the amp into clipping sooner than the Strat, and delivered a pleasant midrange wallop and good low-end response. With the Clean channel's gain maxed out, the 401 kicked

out a JCM800-like overdrive that was pure Marshall.

The Overdrive channel picks up where the Clean channel leaves off, with a tight, Slash-like buzz that's responsive and crystal clear. Play a chord, and each note is distinct and audible. Single-note lines sound thick and chunky, with plenty of pick attack and singing sustain that breaks into harmonically rich feedback. Pushing the gain reveals the DSL401 to be a saturated high-gain monster that delivers a tight and focused dose of sonic mayhem. The only drawback was with the Stratocaster, which seemed to lose its definition in the high-gain channel, sounding a bit splattery.

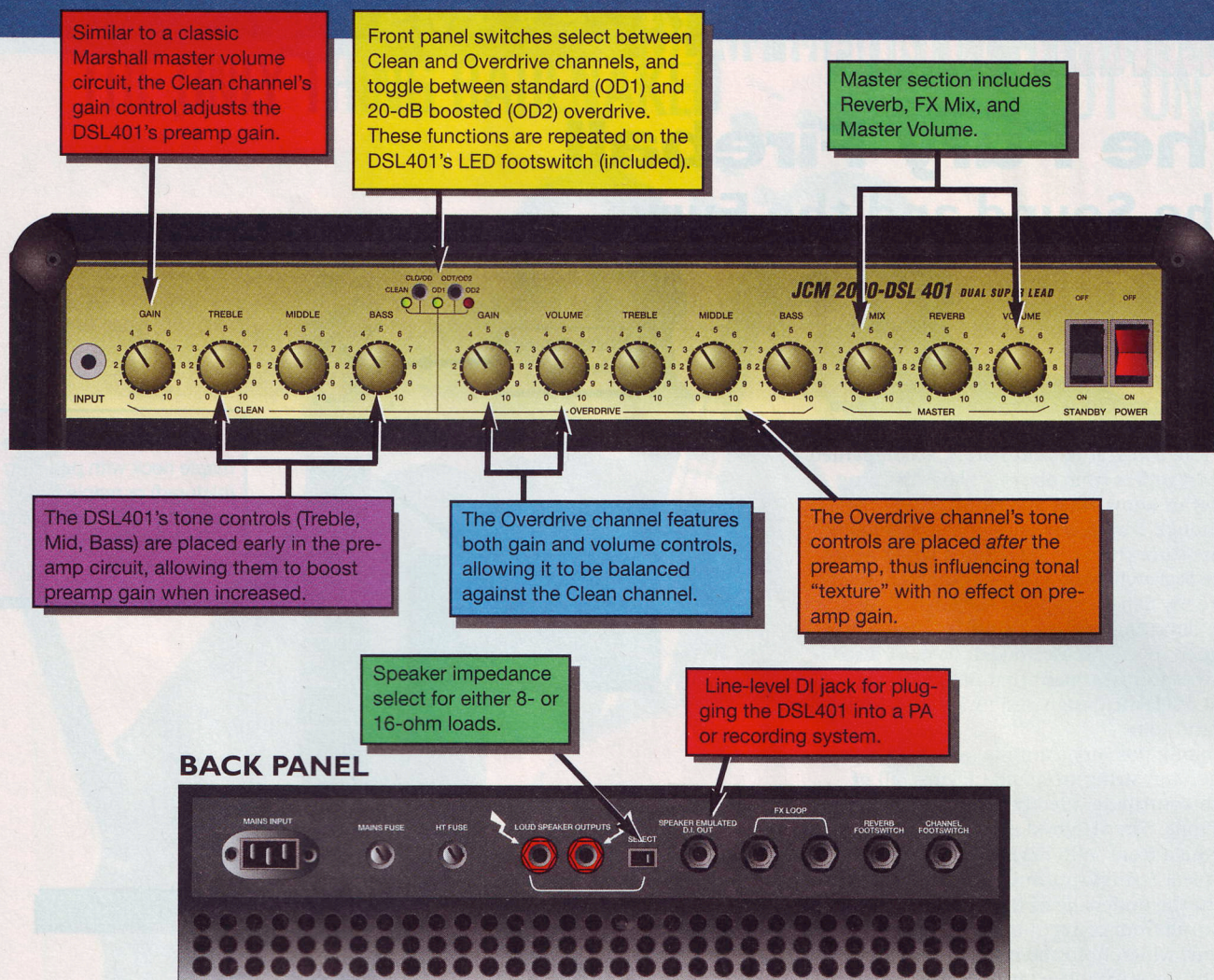
If you crave Marshall thump, I found it by plugging into a 4x12 Marshall cabinet. As for its direct-out capability, the 401's overdrive and distortion tones translated excellently through the speaker emulation circuitry, although the clean tone—while better than satisfactory—lacked the natural warmth found in the power-stage and with a real loudspeaker.

Ultimately, the DSL401 is every bit the workhorse it's built to be, a solid choice for recording and performing, and diverse enough to satisfy players who need a dose of loud, chiming, clean tone to go along with their classic Marshall crunch. In the end, all roads lead back to the same place: the sound of rock and roll. **G**



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Marshall DSL201

It's logical to think that the 40-watt DSL401's half-powered stablemate is simply the same package redone in a lower-priced, lower-powered, and lower-weight skin. Remember, however, that we're dealing with a tube amp, and in tubesville things are rarely black and white. The DSL201 uses just a pair of EL84 output tubes (as opposed to the quartet used by the 401), and the 20-watt combo shares many of the same basic features and design elements of the DSL401—minus the gain boost in its Overdrive channel, the additional speaker extension capability, footswitch access to the onboard reverb, and a speaker impedance select switch—but if you're expecting the DSL201 to be a smaller, lighter version of the DSL401, think again.

The two-channel DSL201 is a different amp altogether—one that performs more like a vintage combo than a downsized Marshall stack—and the sonic difference between the two is startling. Interestingly (but definitely not unwelcome), the DSL201 offers an almost Class A-type sound (its circuit is Class A/B), and yields a chiming and jangly clean tone that can range from piercingly bright to full and bottomy, depending on tone settings. The 201's Clean channel overdrives easily, and pushing the gain beyond to its maximum yields a ballsy, harmonically complex tone that breaks into a beautiful layer of feedback on long sustained notes.

By contrast, the Overdrive channel offers gnarly, full-on saturation with a hint of fuzzbox-like "fizz" that's not unlike an overdriven AC30. An SG Custom managed to cut through the din quite well, although our reference Stratocaster sounded somewhat mushy.

Lower power usually equals lower headroom, and one of the most appealing things about a little amp—the thing that makes the breed especially prized in the studio—is its ability to reach full pre- and power amp saturation at reasonable volumes. The DSL201 is an overdrive monster with two distinct voices—from the warmly saturated Clean channel to the aggressive, ripping tone of the Overdrive. In other words, everything us tube geeks live for. —MB

