



Marshall Billie Joe Armstrong Signature 1959BJA

The legendary Green Day frontman's new amp - Time of Your Life, or a Basket Case?

BY CONNOR FLYS

GROWING UP WATCHING MTV in the 2000s, the deluge of mega-hit singles from Green Day's American Idiot was inescapable. The world was enthralled by the songwriting, attitude and visuals of the title cut, Holiday, Wake Me Up When September Ends and the epic Jesus of Suburbia - but don't forget the magnificent guitar sound too. Of course, frontman Billie Joe Armstrong had years of form in that department already - the band's 1994 breakthrough album Dookie is also well-known for its tone; that sound has been replicated for several successful runs of MXR's Dookie Drive. There's a common thread, and it's a pair of Marshall amplifiers - two Super Lead reissues which Armstrong acquired around the Dookie era and then had modified. These have formed the backbone of Armstrong's tight, percussive, snarling tone ever since; over Green Day's long, highly successful career, then, these two Marshalls have left a sizeable footprint on rock history. Now, the British brand has chosen to commemorate Armstrong with a hand-wired signature amp, based on those long-serving Super Leads with their so-called 'Dookie mods'. Marshall's model code for the 100-watt Super Lead is 1959 (nothing to do with the year; a common misconception) - so this amp becomes the 1959BJA.

Build quality As expected, given its price and top-rung status, the head is put together with care and precision, in the factory that's been turning out these big old amps for generations. It's a hand-wired, British-built Marshall; the componentry, assembly and finishing is all tried-and-tested. The front panel has 'Master' and 'Gain' screen-printed in the style of a label-maker, a fun little touch that calls to mind modified amps of yesteryear. In the top corner, there's a commemorative plate in Marshall's trademark brass, bearing the model name, the 'Dookie' logo, and Armstrong's signature. It's a nice addition that stamps some artist personality onto the amp, without being overbearing. Like other Super Lead models, though, the head shell's corners are unprotected. That's an oversight in terms of durability - it might not be such a worry on a normal, more functional-looking black Marshall, but do you want that tasty blue Tolex getting scuffed and torn?

Usability and features The construction is gloriously traditional, then, but so is the form factor - and that's not without its old-fashioned flaws. There's one central handle on top, and the amp's substantial weight is unevenly-biased; it's tilting uncomfortably against you all the time you're carrying it. Practical it ain't - but once it's sitting on a cab, the BJA looks cool enough to forgive it for the backache... almost. The front panel, meanwhile, offers some clues to the amp's character before you even switch on. For a kick-off, we've two inputs, not the Super Lead's usual four - just Low and High,

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for different gain stages. Importantly, there are also controls for Gain and Master Volume. These functions point not towards the Super Lead, but the later JCM 800 model. Interesting. As for the rear panel - well, there are the speaker outputs, impedance and mains voltage selectors, as well as a nice silk-screen of Armstrong's signature, but not much else in the way of features. In particular, the lack of an effects loop seems a notable oversight; anyone using effects will have to do so through the amp input, which severely restricts functionality for delay or reverb pedals in particular.

Sounds I tested the BJA through an industry-standard Marshall 1960A cab, with my humbucker-equipped Les Paul (the ideal pairing for most Marshalls) and my prized 1962 SG/Les Paul Junior. Armstrong has been relying on Juniors for many years, so this is surely the most appropriate guitar to start with. The Low input first, with Gain and EQ controls around 12 o'clock. It's a bright, punchy and ringing clean tone; classic Marshall. Winding the Gain up, I ducked the Bass down to keep the low-end tight. The BJA began exhibiting those classic 'Plexi' overdrive characteristics we've heard on countless recordings. The Master volume allows this to happen at *slightly* more sensible levels but, make no mistake, this amp is ridiculously, devastatingly, extravagantly loud. From my rehearsal room, I caused numerous earthquakes throughout Bedfordshire with the knob at a mere 10 o'clock. I once measured a dimed Marshall DSL100 at 124dB, and I've no doubt the BJA would top that. Earplugs are non-negotiable.

That's to say nothing of the High input. With the Gain only around 10 o'clock and the Master towards noon, there's already a hell of a lot of gain, the P-90 in my Junior tipping into feedback without any encouragement - but those 'Dookie' mods pay dividends, as this is the sound in every Green Day fan's head. Fat, and full of midrange punch, but with superb definition in the high-end. At the upper reaches of the Gain knob, it's far beyond Green Day - well into classic metal territory with a Les Paul, for example. As the controls suggest, the BJA does operate much like a JCM 800, and has easily as much gain available, but the voicing is still Super Lead through and through. In a word? Magnificent.

Verdict Artist signature Marshall amps don't come along all that often and, however good they are, they tend to be hard to get hold of - often amounting to little more than catnip for collectors, buying them to speculate while the general public gets barely a sniff. That may well

GUITARWORLD VERDICT



The Marshall 1959BJA is the first artist-signature Marshall amp in over a decade, and it might remain out of the grasp of many, but the modified Super Lead tone, in a format that apes the master-volume JCM 800, is truly a magnificent playing experience. Try it, if you can.

- PROS**
- + The cool blue aesthetic and hand-wired credibility.
 - + The circuit design, combining Super Lead tones with master-volume usability.
 - + It sounds utterly awe-inspiring, whether you're playing Green Day or anything else.
- CONS**
- It's a pain to cart around, and will be totally impractical for most.
 - At the very least, an effects loop wouldn't have gone amiss.
 - It's very expensive, and likely to become a collectors' item first, and an amp second.

SPECS
TYPE: Valve-powered amp head
ORIGIN: UK
OUTPUT: 100 watts RMS
SPEAKER: None
CHANNELS: 1
CONTROLS: Presence, Bass, Middle, Treble, Master, Gain
CONNECTIVITY: Front panel 2x ¼" instrument inputs - Low and High gain. Rear panel 2x ¼" speaker outputs (selectable impedance, 16, 8 or 4 ohm)
FOOTSWITCH: None
WEIGHT: 20.1 kg / 44.3 lbs
DIMENSIONS: W 741mm x H 294mm x D 210mm

prove to be the case here too - but does this amp deserve better? Yes, it's far too loud for almost any situation short of Green Day's stadium tours. Yes, it's highly impractical and inflexible, lacking any modern conveniences whatsoever; forget power scaling or reactive load, it doesn't even have an effects loop. The most modern feature is the master volume. If it were a series production amp, this would certainly be a limiting factor in its appeal, but the market for this hand-wired status symbol likely won't care. And if you do happen to get into a room with one, and a decent guitar, you tend to forget about all that as it pulverises your brain and eardrums - into Brain Stew, if you will. This review might be academic for many, who wouldn't have any use for such an amp even if it were attainable. Imagine if it were a readily-available 20-watt Studio model with the same voicing, though. We can but dream.