



PHOTOGRAPHY GAVIN ROBERTS

Marshall 1959HW Super Lead reissue head £1,399



Marshall's original flagship joins its new Hand-Wired range. The original 'Plexi' sound that launched rock guitar is better than ever – and even louder than we remember! **by Nick Guppy**

Marshall's famous 1959 'Plexi' is arguably the most famous amp of all time. From its genesis in the late-sixties, a Super Lead 100 sat atop two 4 x 12 Celestion-loaded cabinets is still for many players the definitive rock guitar rig. Hendrix, Clapton, Kossoff, Beck, Page and Van Halen, to name just a few, have all used this amp at one time or another and created history with it, recording some of the most influential tracks ever committed to tape. For some time now Marshall has offered a printed circuit board 'Plexi' reissue, but following the introduction of its Hand-Wired series 1974 and 2061 amps, the question everyone's been asking is,

"when is the hand-wired 1959 going to be made?" Well, the wait is finally over: the 'Plexi' is now available in the original format that was used for only a few years before Marshall switched to PCB manufacture, turning the hand-wired 'Plexi' into the holy grail of guitar amplifiers.

Cosmetically, this is as close as you can get to an original with a stout plywood cabinet made to the correct dimensions and covered with the earlier small-grain vinyl. Other details, like the smaller gold-faced logo and gold-painted Plexiglas control panels (which gave this model its nickname) are exactly spot-on too.

A lot of mythology, often from dealers looking to jack up the price, has grown up around this amplifier. However, underneath the skin, the 1959 is a simple circuit with roughly 60 small components on a neatly-wired turret board. This particular version is typical of those made towards the end of the 'Plexi' era, with the filter caps sitting on top of a steel, as opposed to aluminium, chassis. Marshall has gone to great trouble to ensure the components are as correct as possible, with the all-important transformers and choke made by Dagnall to the earlier C1998 specification. The standard of wiring and soldering is exceptionally high,



To get the ultimate 'Plexi' sound, run the jumper lead from bottom left input to top right – then plug your guitar into the top left

Using a small jumper lead to combine both channels is the secret for real 'Plexi' tone. You get a thicker sound which can be fine-tuned by balancing one volume control against the other

with neat lacing around the main bundles of cable and twisted heater leads pushed into the chassis corner to reduce hum. The control panel consists of four input jacks feeding two parallel preamp stages, one voiced brighter than the other, with separate volume knobs, a shared three-band EQ and a presence control. No master volumes

here, and no channel switching – this is a simple brute of an amplifier, but that's the secret behind its legendary monstrous tonal power.

It's worth pointing out that amps from this period were very much 'works in progress'. They experienced numerous small and not-so-small component changes, sometimes

because of a change in design or supplier, other times purely for expedience – for example, changing to the nearest value when stocks of a certain resistor or capacitor ran out in order to keep production going. This explains why these early amps varied so much in tone. However, much time and trouble has been taken to ensure

The rivals

Orange AD140	£1,069
HiWatt DR103	£1,190
THD Flexi 50	£1,399

Orange's AD140 has a similar vintage hand-wired vibe, with typical Orange styling that demands you buy at least one 4 x 12 cab for it to sit on. With a huge, midrange-heavy lead tone that can be heard for miles if you wind it up, this is serious stadium-class gear. HiWatt's DR103 is a faithful hand-wired recreation of another earthshaking seventies classic. Original spec Fane speakers give this amp the sound that launched the power chord. THD's Flexi 50 head doesn't have the 1959's sheer volume and headroom but makes up for it with a fabulous tone that easily matches the 1959, and with a lot of extra flexibility



MARSHALL 1959HW SUPER LEAD REISSUE HEAD £1,399

GUITAR AMPS

MARSHALL 1959HW SUPER LEAD REISSUE HEAD

PRICE: £1,399

ORIGIN: UK

TYPE: All-valve single-channel Class AB head with solid-state rectification

OUTPUT: 100W RMS

VALVES: Three ECC83/12AX7 preamp, four selected JJ EL34 power amp

DIMENSIONS: 250 (h) x 640 (w) x 240mm (d)

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 21/44

CABINET: Birch ply

CHANNELS: Two, non-switching.

CONTROLS: Volume one, volume two, bass, mid, treble and presence

ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Selectable speaker impedance

OPTIONS: 1960A/B HW 4 x 12 cabinets loaded with Celestion G12-H30 speakers (£599)

RANGE OPTIONS: 1974X 18W Hand-Wired combo (£1,199) and the 2061X 18-watt Hand-Wired head (£999)

Marshall Amplification

01908 375411

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→ the new Hand-Wired version will be far more consistent.

“For this amp we eventually narrowed our listening tests down to two original heads with slightly different characteristics that we felt exemplified the ‘Plexi’ sound – the re-issue incorporates the best features of each,” explains veteran Marshall R&D tone guru Danny Thomas. “One of those heads was only about 60 serial numbers away from the amps Hendrix took to Woodstock – so you can’t get much closer than that! These amps have so much character and just moving a single wire can alter the sound or response. So, once we’re certain where everything goes we make sure it’s reproduced exactly. It’s interesting to see our production staff using techniques and skills more commonplace a generation earlier.”

SOUNDS: Neville Marten once wrote that every guitarist should experience playing through a ‘Plexi’ stack wound all the way up, and he’s absolutely right. We set up our own listening test, alongside a late sixties 1959 which was restored a few years ago and an earlier version with the filter caps contained inside the chassis. The new amp excelled with greater headroom, less noise and a darker, less aggressive treble that made soloing a sheer unadulterated pleasure, even using a Strat’s bridge pickup.

“The original circuit actually continued beyond the Plexiglas panel versions,” commented Thomas, “so there are metal-faced 1959s electrically identical to the ‘Plexi’ – and they sound just as good. There was a transformer change around 1971 that did make



MARSHALL 1959HW	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

■ **WE LIKED** The classic ‘Plexi’ sound re-issued to absolute

■ **WE DISLIKED** Nothing, but it’s extremely loud so won’t sound its best in small venues

a difference: the lamination specs changed from standard to high quality – the reason is lost in the mists of time – and that gave the amp a harder, more aggressive edge, similar to our SLP re-issue. The Hand-Wired 1959 uses the earlier, lo-fi transformer spec which gives the definitive, darker, early ‘Plexi’ tone. Those very early versions with the filter caps inside the chassis tend to be the ones with higher noise levels as the transformers were closer together. The new model has the wider transformer spacing and we’re very pleased with the headroom and noise performance.”

The 1959’s brutal power and endless headroom is perfectly suited to big arenas and outdoor festivals. However, you can tame it for smaller venues. Using a small jumper lead to combine

both channels is the secret for real ‘Plexi’ tone. With this plugged in, you get a thicker sound which can be fine-tuned by balancing one volume control against the other. An attenuator like Marshall’s excellent Powerbrake means you can wind those volume controls up to get the output valves working properly, while a small amount of extra front-end gain from a good overdrive pedal helps push the preamp. It doesn’t take long to dial this set-up in, and just a few minutes work pulled some frighteningly accurate Hendrix sounds from a Jap reissue Strat, detuned for extra authenticity. Switch to a Les Paul, and every classic riff played on this combination is unbelievably pure. From vintage Page or Cream-era Clapton, through to AC/DC or Thin Lizzy, it’s almost unreal to hear such great sounds coming from such a simple circuit.

Verdict

There’s no doubt, having put this amp up against the best original samples we could find, that Marshall’s recreation of its original flagship is the real deal. You don’t buy an amp like this for versatility or portability, it’s purely down to sound – and the new Hand-Wired 1959 has it exactly right. Old amplifiers don’t age gracefully like guitars, they usually need a lot of work to make them useable and safe. So buying an original is for those who want to make an investment, not music, and inevitably there are plenty of forgeries and scams waiting to part fools from their money. If you want a ‘Plexi’ to make music with, our advice is to forget the second-hand market altogether and get one of these. At this amp’s retail price, you can afford to buy the head and both 4 x 12s for far less than the cost of a tatty original and be assured of consistently authentic sounds.

The Super Lead’s nature means it’s not an amp for shy retiring types, but if you want to make a statement there’s no better way to do it than by plugging into one of these. This is the amp that the entire lexicon of rock guitar was written with and it’s still in great shape. Accept no substitute, take no prisoners – the ‘Plexi’ is back, let’s rock! 🎸

Marshall 1959HW Super Lead Reissue

Guitarist RATING

★★★★★



The first step to that classic Marshall sound? Switching the amp on!