



Marshall 1959, JCM800, JCM900, DSL, and JVM overdrive pedal

Marshall is going for gold with this new line of pedals – but do they live up to the iconic amps they are inspired by?

By Richard Blenkinsop

ONCE UPON A time, Marshall reigned supreme as the ultimate rock-tone deity. Whether it was a sweat-drenched dive bar or a sold-out arena, Marshall's loud and gritty voice was omnipresent. For many, that classic British sound is the very heartbeat of rock 'n' roll - anything else just doesn't cut it! It's no surprise, then, that Marshall-in-a-box-style pedals have been some of the most popular flavors of dirt box for decades.

Now, despite dipping Its toes into the pedal waters with iconic releases like The Guv'nor and Drive Master, not to mention those petite silver pedals from the early 2000s that pop up on pedalboards every now and then, Marshall hasn't fully unleashed a pedal series that captures the essence of specific eras from its tube amp history - until now!

Marshall's all-new collection of overdrive/distortion pedals takes a stab at chronicling the brand's evolution from the light breakup of the mid-sixties to the searingly hot, face-melting gain of later models. This quintet of all analog stompboxes consists of the 1959, DSL, JCM800, JCM900, and JVM, and each pedal sparkles in sleek gold and black, practically shouting "Marshall!" with every glance. The front panel features four rotary knobs that look like they've been plucked from a classic amp, while the functionality of the dials changes from stomp to stomp as you progress through the range.

So without further ado, let's take a deep dive into each of the pedals in the new Overdrive Series and see if they can live up to the legendary names proudly displayed on their faces.

Build quality

On first inspection, it would appear Marshall has made these gilded pedals out of solid gold. There's a reassuring weight to each of the stompboxes, instilling me with a sense of security for the unit's durability. There is no denying that any of them would stand up to harsh road conditions on tour. They feel solid, rugged, and robust, albeit, perhaps, a little too heavy.

In a world where many players are downsizing their rigs and looking for lighter, smaller, and more compact options, these new pedals take a somewhat old-school approach, going for a large yet straightforward format and weighing almost twice as much as a standard Boss pedal.

Now, don't get me wrong, I actually like the look and feel of these pedals. The tactile knobs are quintessentially Marshall, while the simplified layout and clean look are sure to appeal to just about every guitarist out there. However, if you are the type of player to stress over pedalboard real estate or you need to worry about the weight of your rig for flying, you may want to consider a less bulky option.

Usability

In my humble opinion, when it comes to overdrive pedals, all you really need is four knobs and the truth – and that's precisely what we have here. Marshall really has taken a back-to-basics approach with these stompboxes, giving a limited number of controls for which you can shape your tone. The result is a user-friendly pedal that takes mere seconds to dial in.

For the most part, the dial functions stay the same throughout the range, with each pedal having volume, gain, and tone controls. However, in an attempt to capture the essence of each of the real-world amps, each pedal offers its own unique control. For example, the 1959 gets a High Treble gain control in addition to the "normal" gain dial. The JVM model sees the inclusion of a noise gate, and the JCM800 and JCM900 get a Sensitivity and Contour control, respectively. Lastly, the DSL benefits from a Deep control that mimics the bass boost switch found on the classic version of the Dual Super Lead.

It's worth noting there is no digital trickery going on inside the pedals. These aren't digital modelers. There aren't endless menus, countless cab sims to scroll through, and no MIDI controllable parameters or smartphone apps. These are all-analog, straight-to-the-point drive pedals designed to hit the front end of your amp and transform your meek, clean sound into a fire-breathing Marshall stack – and you know, that's kind of refreshing.

Sounds

Okay, so now it's time to hear how these pedals sound. For the purpose of reviewing the pedals, I kept the amp the same throughout. I turned to my old faithful, a Vox AC30C2, loaded with a duo of Celestion Greenback speakers. I plugged directly into the Normal channel, added a

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smidge of reverb, and let rip. I did switch out guitars to something appropriate to the pedals, but I'll get to that as I go through the sounds.

1959

Starting with the 1959 Super Lead, I'm expecting to hear a rounded, full-bodied tone that is dynamic and full of character – and thankfully, that's precisely what I get. Armed with a '60s reissue Gibson ES-335 and having both the Normal and Treble dials set to around 2, it was effortless to dial in that iconic on-the-edge-of-break-up tone. Perfect for bluesy rock rhythm, the pedal retained the bell-like tone of the Gibson semi-hollow flawlessly, chewing up and spitting out my pentatonic licks with ease.

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Turning both gain controls up, and the saturation gets more intense – but the pedal never loses its clarity. In fact, it only sounds better. With the gain cranked, I can't resist switching to my Gibson SG and attempting my very best early Angus impression. Spikey, sharp, and with an immediate note attack, there's nowhere to hide with a tone like this, but boy, is it fun to play.

As I increased the gain, I did find myself needing to temper the bright and in-your-face tone by pulling back on the tone control. The pedal can get a little shrill at times, but this was easily smoothed out by dialing in the tone control to taste.

If you are looking for that vintage, lower-gain Marshall tone that is synonymous with the late '60s and early '70s, then this is most definitely the pedal for you.

JCM800

Next up is arguably Marshall's poster child, the iconic JCM800. Now, there was only one guitar that I wanted to play through this pedal, my beloved Gibson Les Paul Standard. Setting every dial straight up the middle and striking an A chord, I am instantly reminded why the LP and Marshall stack is such a legendary combination – this thing rocks!

Compressed and tight, the JCM800 pedal begs to be fed classic rock riffs – and no matter how many you give it, it always seems to be hungry for more. The curiously named Sensitivity control is there to take the place of the high and low sensitivity inputs on the original amp. Marshall states that this knob is designed for "Fine-tuning gain, adjusting distortion, and balancing output, ensuring seamless integration with your amp." In practice, it works similarly to the two gain controls on the 1959 pedal. Working in tandem with the primary gain control, increasing the sensitivity results in more saturation, more compression, and a tighter sound overall.

On my gigging pedalboard, my main drive comes from the JHS Andy Timmons Angry Charlie – a pedal I literally never turn off through the entire set. So, you can say I'm a big fan of this particular flavor of Marshall drive. I love the chewy, thick distortion you get with a dimed 800, and this is available in spades with Marshall's latest pedal.

If I were to have one minor complaint, it is that there is no boost option available. I get that this series of pedals is trying to be as simple as possible, and yes, early JCM800s were only single-channel, but a dual footswitch option, with a built-in boost, would have made this pedal even more versatile – tipping it over the edge from an enjoyable stomp to a pedalboard mainstay for me.

JCM900

Often relegated to the shadow of its more famous big brother, the JCM900 builds on what came before, offering even more gain and a contemporary mid-range. With Flying V in hand, it didn't take long to hone in on a gut-punching metal tone.

The gain on the 900 is pretty ferocious and can get a little fizzy if you're not careful. I found that having it cranked was just way too top-heavy, and even dialing the tone back did very little to tame it. For me, 8 on the gain is the maximum I would use, after that, the bright attack gets too much, and we start to get into wasp-in-a-jar territory.

In my opinion, the secret weapon of the JCM900 pedal is the Contour knob. Allowing you to fine-tune the midrange frequencies from the scooped tones of the early 2000s to the pokey sounds of pop-punk, this one control really transforms the tone of the pedal, making it incredibly versatile.

DSL

Based on the second channel of the JCM2000 Dual Super Lead, this pedal may be my least favorite of the bunch. Does it sound bad? No, definitely not. In fact, it more than delivers on the classic British tone that you'd expect from a unit bearing the Marshall name. That said, I don't think it offers anything that the others don't already.

Tonally, it can be described as a little more open and not as compressed as the 800 or 900, but I did find it fairly easy to dial in a very similar tone from the JCM800 pedal – and to my ears, the 800 has a more pleasant low end, and it could be argued that it's a more sought after sound.

The Deep knob – designed to replicate the switch found on the original – boosts the bass and seems to alter the mids at the same time as

GUITARWORLD VERDICT



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PROS

- + Great sounds
- + Solid build quality
- + Good variety of models

CONS

- NFairly large enclosures
- On the heavy side
- Dual channel options would've been nice

SPECS

TYPE: Overdrive/Distortion
CONTROLS: 1959: Volume, Tone, H. Treble, Normal | JCM800: Volume, Tone, Gain, Sensitivity | JCM900: Volume, Tone, Gain, Contour | JVM: Volume, Tone, Gain, Gate | DSL: Volume, Tone, Gain, Deep
FEATURES: All analog drive pedals that replicate the sound of famous Marshall amps
CONNECTIVITY: Input, Output, 9V Power
BYPASS: True Bypass
POWER: 9V, 100 mA
DIMENSIONS (MM): 101 x 52 x 131
WEIGHT (KG): 0.74

you rotate the dial. I didn't find it particularly useful with a Vox AC30, an amp that has plenty of bass already, but I suppose if your amp is lacking in the lows, then you may find this pedal variant more useful.

JVM

Personally, I've always thought that the JVM offered way too much drive for me. There's enough gain in a JVM to decapitate the front row of your gig, and for that reason, I've always steered clear of them – but after trying the JVM in pedal form, maybe I was too hasty to dismiss this modern classic.

Yes, there's a lot of saturation, but it's smooth, tight, and flatters my playing. Lead lines are easier, notes ring out for days, and I find myself attempting licks that I wouldn't dare on the 1959 variant. Of course, playing with this level of distortion is going to introduce a fair amount of hiss to the signal, but thankfully, Marshall has thought of that. This is the only pedal in the line with a built-in noise gate, and it's a welcome addition. With just a single threshold control, it's a breeze to implement – simply turn the knob until the hiss is gone, and you are good to go. The gate has a reasonably fast attack, meaning even at extreme settings, it never feels like it gets in the way of my playing.

Okay, so it was a given that the JVM would take high-gain in its stride, but that's not to say this stompbox doesn't clean up. Rolling back the gain to a more sensible level, I was greeted with a more familiar Marshall tone. There's plenty of clarity and bite, and it feels incredibly dynamic under my fingers. In fact, this might just be the most versatile pedal in the range. From blues to classic rock, punk to metal, the JVM can do it all – and without getting too noisy!

Verdict

In an era of hi-tech amp modeling, digital recreations, IRs, and complex MIDI switching, it's refreshing to see Marshall take an old-school approach to this line of pedals.

Yes, Marshall-in-a-box pedals are nothing new – practically every pedal maker has a British-inspired stomp in their catalog – but none of them are actually crafted by the original makers of the amps they are copying. For the most part, each and every pedal nails the sound of the amps that inspired them and, in some cases, even bring an extra level of flexibility. The range is diverse, expertly put together, and, better yet, they are affordable.

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