

SOUND CHECK

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KING SIZE

Marshall 2203KK Kerry King signature JCM800 head



BY ERIC KIRKLAND

AFTER 20-PLUS YEARS of beating down audiences with mesmerizing machine gun rhythms and knuckle-cracking power riffs, Slayer's Kerry King has firmly established himself as an iconic member of metal's elite madmen. In addition to his barbaric style of playing, King has always credited a large portion of his sound to a particular Marshall JCM800 that he respectfully calls "The Beast."

King purchased the amp in the mid-to-late Eighties, which should already tell Marshall fans something about its malevolent character. For those not in the know, early Marshall 2203 heads, like the 2203 reissue head currently offered by Marshall, had a less vicious edge than the JCM800 2203 amps produced from the mid Eighties until 1990. The reason? In the mid Eighties, Marshall changed the design: four filter caps were replaced with two that boasted a higher working-voltage capability. The result was less power amp "sag" when the head was cranked, especially on the low end, making the amp more aggressive. In addition, King's Beast is



MARSHALL 2203KK KERRY KING SIGNATURE JCM800 HEAD

LIST PRICE: \$2,700.00
MANUFACTURER: Marshall Amplification, PLC, marshallamps.com
POWER OUTPUT: 100 watts
CHANNELS: One
FEATURES: Beast switch activates custom noise gate and variable gain boost with King's custom EQ curve; five speaker outputs
CONTROLS: Presence, bass, middle, treble, master volume, preamp volume, Beast switch, gate threshold, Assault intensity
COVERING: Black textured vinyl, custom-styled cloth and faceplate with "tribal" decoration based on King's tattoos
TUBE COMPLEMENT: Four KT-88, three 12AX7

one of those special instruments that for some reason stand out from all others. As King says, it "sounds as if Satan himself reached up and touched the amp." [*Relax, folks. Kerry was speaking figuratively—GW Ed.*]

Marshall began its recreation of the amp by measuring all of the Beast's components and performance characteristics. But the amp was not the only element of King's rig that Marshall sought to duplicate. Part of King's signature sound has always been a 10-band graphic EQ that he runs in front of the amp. So that King could achieve his tone without any outboard devices, Marshall incorporated the sound of this EQ into a switchable front-panel feature, along with an exceptionally well-designed noise gate. Best of all, unlike Zakk Wylde and Slash's signature Marshall amps, the Kerry King 2203KK JCM800 is a standard production amp and, with good reason, the new flagship of the JCM800 line.

FEATURES

KING HAS ALWAYS replaced his amp's stock EL34 power tubes with 6550s for a beefier and more robust tone. (If

you want to make this change to your Marshall 2203, have a reliable tech make the switch and properly bias the amp.) At his request, Marshall loaded one of the 2203KK test amps with a set of the audiophile-favored KT88 tubes. The results were astonishing, and King agreed that the extra depth and authority provided by the KT88s complemented his ass-kicking tone. Using these tubes also made it possible to capture the Beast's sonic footprint without having to commission an expensive custom transformer for the 2203KK production amps.

Aside from this change, the remainder of the 100-watt 2203KK's all-tube power and preamp sections are identical to other 2203s and feature controls for volume, master, treble, bass, middle and presence. Of course, the particular component values discovered in King's Beast are also applied to the new signature amp and remain a closely guarded key to its performance. While the 2003KK's sound honors the Beast, the amp's fascia honors the man, with Celtic lettering and tribal flames that are based on King's tattoos. Perceptive users will also notice that the control

KT-88 tubes create deep midrange and spacious bass tones.



panel's graphic design points directly to a switch labeled "the Beast."

Punching this button pile-drives the amp's front end with gain and introduces the equalization curve that King achieved through his old EQ unit. Dialing the associated Assault knob acts just like the level slider on King's original EQ, adding gain and drive to the fine-tuned signal. Hitting the Beast switch also engages Marshall's impressive onboard noise gate. This blissfully simple expansion-style gate is one of the most effective gates I've encountered and nothing short of a miracle device for hardcore players who favor choppy rhythm techniques. Unlike traditional gates, it doesn't interfere with the signal's tone or induce a preset decay. The result is sustain that lasts until you silence the strings.

PERFORMANCE

I DON'T KNOW whether it's the substitution of KT88 tubes or the special tweaks, but Marshall's 2203KK is surprisingly capable of producing downright delicate tones that are woody and rich. Where most Marshall JCM800s are edgy and hyper-focused on driving upper-midrange frequencies, King's amp delivers round notes, incredible

imaging and lows that bellow as if emanating from deep inside the amp. Blues artists especially will relish this amp's ability to fill a room with tone in the tradition of the great "Plexi" Marshalls.

Of course, most players will buy this amp with the expectation of sheer brutality. Sure enough, kicking in the Beast switch unleashed a torrent of gain and pulverizing crunch. Stringing together a series of power chords and staccato bass riffs through a set of EMGs sounded like a tank's steel treads crushing the charred skeletal remains of its conquered foes. Still, through all this power and violence, the amp remained articulate and controlled.

A lot of this control must be attributed

The Beast switch activates King's custom EQ curve and a variable gain boost.

The custom-designed gate controls hiss and noise seamlessly.



to the onboard gate. However, once you stop the strings' vibration with either hand, the gate clamps shut like a bear trap on a chipmunk. This unprecedented command over a high-gain signal removes all barriers to style and naturally encourages palm-controlled down-strokes, alternate picking and interwoven chords.

THE BOTTOM LINE

KERRY KING'S SIGNATURE Marshall JCM800 is perhaps the most perfect plug-and-play hardcore amp ever conceived. Big KT88 tubes drive the classic JCM800 design into deep tonal realms, while the Beast circuit's equalized gain boost and studio-quality noise gate conjure the wicked glory of King's infamous sound. Like the discovery of gunpowder, this is the amp that will light the way for a new breed of war pigs and metal machines.

PRO	CON
IMMENSE AND ARTICULATE HIGH-GAIN TONE; BUILT-IN NOISE GATE; VERSATILE	GATE ACTIVE ONLY WITH BEAST SWITCH ON; BOOST NOT FOOTSWITCHABLE; NO EFFECT LOOP