



Marshall 2203KK £849

The all-tube and tattooed signature amp of Slayer's Kerry King mixes classic performance with a short-cut to the dark heart of his own crushing tone **by Simon Bradley**

Sadly, guitarists in ferocious metal bands rarely get the praise they deserve as far as their technique goes but make no mistake: Kerry King and Jeff Hanneman, his guitar sparring partner in US titans Slayer, are extremely good players. If you've heard Angel Of Death, you'll certainly agree that the rhythm parts are incredible.

For a company of Marshall's stature, very few players have been recognised with a signature amp and those that have been, such as Hendrix and Wylde, have used amps bearing Dr Jim's iconic logo since day one of their respective careers. That's certainly the case with Kerry King too, and his signature tone is made up from a 2203 and a 10-band graphic MXR EQ pedal with which he boosts both the mids and the gain.

He has dubbed his main 2203 'The Beast' and Marshall took scrupulous readings from both the amp and King's own graphic pedal to ensure the new head could recreate the tone on demand: thanks to a switch also named 'The Beast' on the amp's front panel, it can. A specifically designed and voiced EQ section is engaged that provides the King rhythm tone that works alongside a high-quality noise gate, controlled by the threshold pot.

The amp's master and preamp volume pots still operate in The Beast mode, as does the main

four-way EQ, thus allowing you to colour the tone as you wish, while the Assault control lets you regulate the level of boost.

Original 2203 amps followed Marshall's traditional practice of combining EL34 power tubes with ECC83 preamp valves, but here the power section uses a quartet of KT88s in order to take advantage of that noise-bottle's characteristic girth and additional low-end thump.

Elsewhere only the provision of a single input and a front panel decal based on the tribal tats that cover King from head to foot give anything away regarding the amp's departure from a classic 2203 spec and subsequent potential for aural damage...

Sounds

With The Beast still in its cage for now, we instantly found that the classic rock tone of 2203s we remembered to be present in spades. To our ears the best tones are to be found with humbuckers rather than single-coils, but a warm overdrive complete with a wholly musical valve bloom and associated compression should be easily accomplished with pretty much all guitars.

As Kerry himself found back at the beginning of his career, a stock 2203 won't get quite dirty enough for those extreme metal tones but, for all styles of rock it remains among the very best amp configurations of all time. With

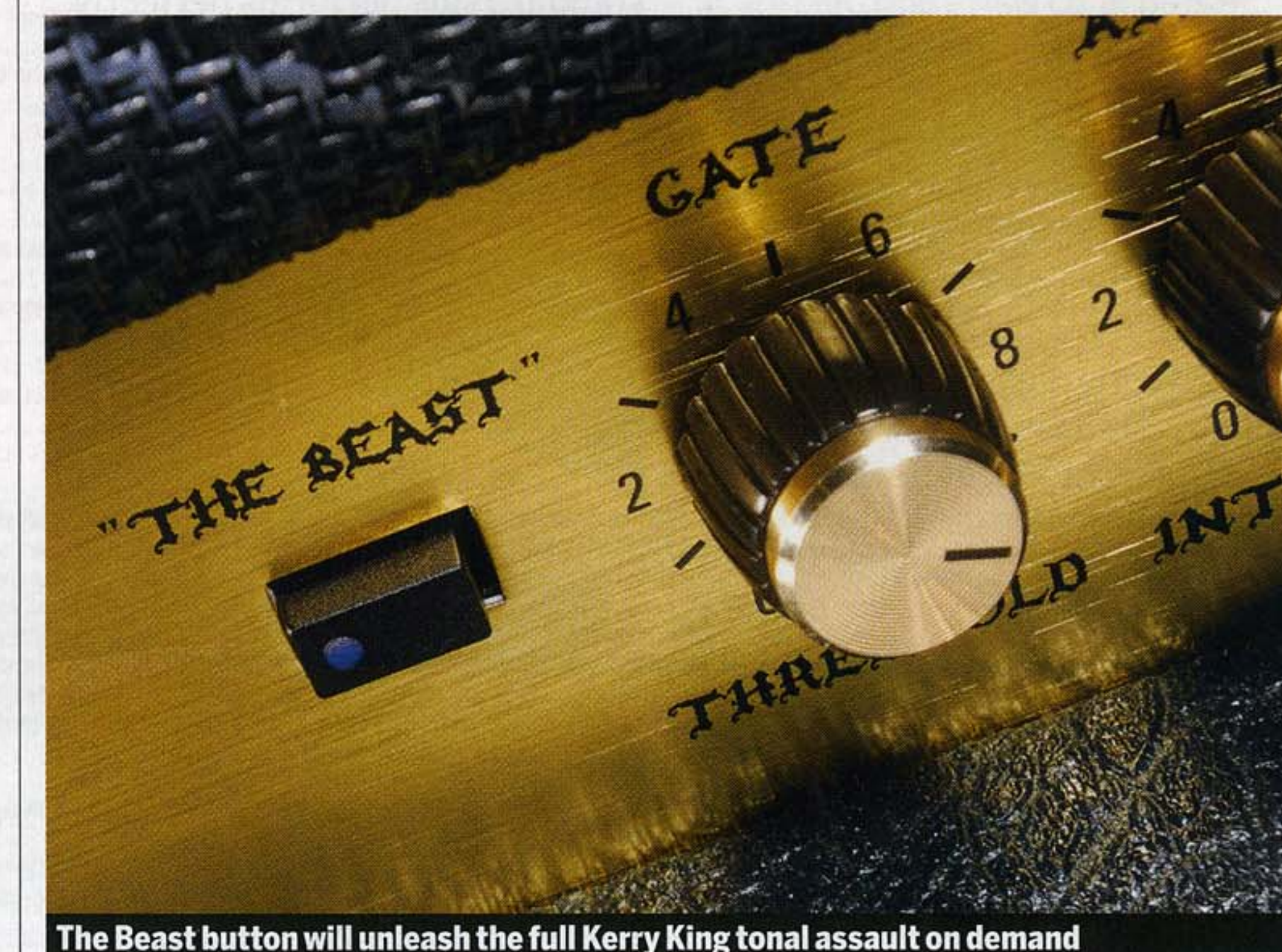
the master set at around half and the preamp at three-quarters, we dusted off a Gibson Les Paul and revelled in the tone, full of Marshall's familiar warmth and clarity whilst at the same time driving our ears very nicely.

We've reviewed a large number of high-end amps that offer modelling, numerous channels and so on, but there's something very intimate about plugging into a single-channel all-tube head: occasionally it's fun to be required to consider how to obtain your

tones using just your guitar and wits rather than simply stepping on a footswitch.

One of the clichéd (and incorrect, we should stress) opinions of Marshall amps over the years used to be that the clean tones weren't up to very much, but that's certainly not the case here with this 2007 model. Using the Gibson's volume to control the level and flicking to the toggle's

The Beast switch effortlessly turns most humbucker-equipped guitars into aural weapons



The Beast button will unleash the full Kerry King tonal assault on demand

central position, the cleaned-up sound is perfectly good.

We felt it was only right to get as close to the correct guitar as we could for parts of our sound tests so, with a USA-made, EMG-equipped BC Rich Warlock, we reached for that Beast switch with equal amounts of trepidation and excitement. As we expected the tone changes out of all proportion. It's best to set the gate as soon as you've arrived at your desired tone settings too: the small LED within the switch illuminates when the gate itself is closed, allowing for exceptionally accurate settings.

Kerry's tone is actually cleaner



Does size matter...?

Marshall Kerry King MG10KK £67

Marshall has also produced a Kerry King signature amp for entry-level metallers: the MG10KK. "Make it thunder!" suggests the man himself on Marshall's website but, aside from the red front panel and tribal livery, the spec here is virtually the same as a conventional MG10CD (£64).

Rated at 10 watts and utilising the standard 6.5-inch speaker, this two-channel amp is perfect for practice sessions and comes loaded with an emulated headphone input and line out/CD in. What has always struck us is just how satisfyingly musical the high-gain settings are with these little Marshalls and the contour control here allows for similar levels of crushing gain at subdued bedroom volumes.

If you own any of the smaller-powered MG-series amps, you're under no real obligation to fork out for the MG10KK but, with a look all its own, you may find you can't resist.

than you may think (by which we mean more articulate and defined rather than actually lacking in sheer gain) and, with our Warlock, the sound is genuinely as close as anyone's likely to get to that Slayer roar. For ultra-fast and staccato-laden riffs, the tone is absolutely spot-on and we found that setting the preamp to six and the Assault to half gave ample gain. Obviously as you turn it up, the sound becomes dirtier and fuller, but also slightly less distinct: still, the excellent gate operates just as it should, giving absolute silence once you've dampened your strings irrespective of volume.

That classic 2203 hard rock tone certainly gives plenty of power to your arm, but this sound, based on the boosted mids, is even more brutal and has the added advantage of never becoming overly indistinct. It makes for a nice change and if you're the sole guitarist in a metal band, you'll find this style of sound will suit your needs much more efficiently: abundant power, projection, width and gain are just some of the highlights.

There are far more appropriate amps from Marshall's illustrious canon to choose from should you require additional tonal versatility, multi-channels and the like, and the only thing we really missed here, as we'd feared, was a remote switch for the Beast setting: hopefully this won't prove to be a trick missed.

Verdict

This is a heavy metal amp, pure and simple, and if you require specific blues or clean tones, you should be prepared to look elsewhere even though the amp's standard side performs perfectly acceptably in these regards. So, within the realistic parameters a Kerry King signature amp should be placed, it does its job



Jim Marshall and Kerry King-approved



The usual Marshall controls are present, albeit Kerry-ised in the typeface department

The LED within the switch illuminates when the gate itself is closed, allowing for exceptionally accurate settings

remarkably well and, The Beast notwithstanding, the amp is a genuine recreation of the lauded 2203 that sounds just as good as we recall.

With a few exceptions, Kerry uses just one tone throughout a Slayer show and the fact that very sonic boom resides within this amp is a testament to just how close Marshall has got to the man's original head. There's no doubt that active pickups are part of the equation too, but we found that The Beast switch effortlessly turns most humbucker-equipped guitars into aural weapons.

The price is pretty impressive too, coming in at significantly under a grand, and as long as you're aware that it does exactly what it says on its tattooed tin and not a great deal else, you'll be blown away. **G**

The bottom line

We like: It's a no-nonsense heavy rock and metal amp that sounds phenomenal

We dislike: The lack of a remote switch function for 'The Beast'

Guitarist says: Essential for Kerry King fans but its simple path to mammoth tone should be investigated by anyone working in the genre



Marshall 2203KK

PRICE: £849

ORIGIN: UK

TYPE: 100W signature all-tube head

DIMENSIONS: 750 (w) x 310 (h) x 215mm (d)

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 21.5/47.4

CABINET: Birch ply

VALVES: Three ECC83, four KT88

CHANNELS: One

CONTROLS: Presence, bass, middle, treble, master, preamp, 'The Beast' EQ preset with associated gate/threshold and assault/intensity controls

FOOTSWITCH: N/A

ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Five speaker outputs, single high sensitivity guitar input, amp cover

OPTIONS: None

RANGE OPTIONS: The Vintage Series JCM800 2203 reissue goes for £1,091

Marshall 01908 375400

www.marshallamps.com

Test results

Build quality	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★