



By Tim Gideon

Rawk-themed headphones have been popping up more and more lately—we recently had the Motörheadphones Motörizer storm into our labs, and now we have the Marshall Monitor. At \$200, the Monitor is a classy homage to the legendary guitar amps. But it's more than just a cool-looking headphone pair—it also offers powerful, distortion-free audio, and the ability to remove a filter if you prefer your sound brighter rather than warmer. It's hard to find many flaws with the exceedingly comfortable, solid performance of the Marshall Monitor, so we've awarded it our Editors' Choice. In the \$200 headphone realm, it's a stand-out option worthy of your attention.

Design

From a design standpoint, the Marshall Monitor is a solid product. Unlike recent rock-inspired headphones that were lacking in this department (we're looking at you, Motörheadphones Motörizer), Marshall gets the important things right—the headphones not only sound good, but feel good.

Visually, the headphones are a home run—a striking homage to Marshall guitar amps, without getting cheesy. The familiar white, cursive logo appears on each ear, atop a black vinyl, fake grain leather base—just as it does on the classic amplifiers. The earpads and leather-lined headband are amply cushioned and remain exceedingly comfortable over long listening periods, while the cable is detachable and can be plugged into a jack on either earcup.

Brass hinges that allow the headphones to fold down flat, along with brass details on the inside of the headband and along the cable, make the Monitor feel special and not like some tacky knock-off. It's hard to style headphones after an iconic amp and not end up with a silly-looking product only die-hard fans would consider wearing. But Marshall has instead made new use of their classy logo and design motifs—you needn't worship at the altar of Jimi Hendrix and Slash to be drawn to them.

There are also removable audio filters beneath the cloth grille covers inside the earcups. Removing them is easy—as is replacing the earpads, which are attached magnetically. (More on the filters in a bit.)

The inline remote is of the one-button variety—not ideal, especially on a \$200 pair, but it works. You can answer calls, play and pause, skip tracks, but there's no way to adjust volume. (And thus no way to make these go to 11.) Call clarity through the inline microphone is clear enough for your partner to hear you on the other line.

A black canvas drawstring carrying pouch is included, but of all the headphones I'd expect to decide against including a ¼-inch adapter for larger jacks, a company basing its designs on amps for guitars (with ¼-inch inputs) isn't one of them. It would've been nice to have, but they are cheap and easy to procure at Radio Shack and elsewhere.

Performance

At top volumes on tracks with serious sub-bass content, like the Knife's "Silent Shout," the Marshall Monitor flirts with distortion but never gives in. The headphones can feel as though they are vibrating tremendously, but the audio delivery is still clean, and quite powerful. The intense kick drum loop on this track is given some serious low-frequency boost. At high volumes, it sounds like

the Monitor is packing a club-size subwoofer inside. At moderate volumes, it's merely a powerful low frequency response curve—not over-the-top, but certainly not the kind of flat response the typical audio purist seeks.

But the Monitor has a trick up its sleeve—or, to be literal, in its earpad. The headphones are delivered with filters beneath the cloth grilles for the drivers. The filters dampen the high frequencies somewhat, and Marshall makes these filters intentionally removable. With them in, Bill Callahan's voice on "Drover" still has a bit of treble edge to it, but it's the low frequencies in his baritone delivery that stand out most—and the same goes for the heavy background drumming, which moves closer to the forefront of the mix with the bass boosting.

The kick drum loop on Jay-Z and Kanye West's "No Church in the Wild" lacks the crunchy attack that helps it stand out in the mix, ceding much of the airspace to the sub-bass synth hits that punctuate the beat. The vocals on this track are also less crisp and upfront than I tend to prefer.

That's with the filters in, though—remove them, and we have a brand new sound signature! The deep bass is still there, but now vocals are brighter, crisper, and the attack of the kick drum loop has much more high-mid presence. Bill Callahan's voice on the previous track also gets clearer and brighter, as does the guitar strumming and the drumming. I think you can tell which mode I prefer—sans filters is a brighter, but still bass-boosted sound.

On classical tracks like John Adams "The Chairman Dances," it's more of a toss-up. Without filters, the higher register strings and percussion shine in the mix, unbridled, while the lower register instruments take on less of the bass boost than do instruments in the previous genres. Put the filters in, and the growl of the brass is less bright and intense, and the lower register instruments seem to take a more prominent place in the mix, or at least stand closer to the higher register strings and percussion. The drum hits at the end are boosted pretty heavily in the deep lows—but they manage to avoid sounding too unnatural, and they sound this way with the filters in or out. I probably still prefer the filters out, but which is truly better comes down to your own personal preference.

The Marshall Monitor is in no way a flat-response pair of accurate headphones. It's also not so intensely bass-heavy that low-frequency fiends only need consider them. For those of you who enjoy rich, articulate, clean bass, all the way down into the sub-bass realm, the Monitor delivers. Take the filters out, and it also makes things crisp and bright. In this price range, if you're looking for something a bit less bass-heavy, the TDK ST750 is on the brighter side, but is still quite powerful. The Sennheiser HD 558 offers a more standard approach to its sound signature—there's still plenty of low-end, but things are a bit more balanced than they are with the Monitor. And if all of these options are out of your budget, the Skullcandy Hesh 2 delivers decent, clean audio at a low price—and looks cool.

But the Marshall Monitor looks cooler than most headphones, and I must admit I was surprised—I partially expected these rock stars to be all style, no substance. Instead, I found a well-crafted, cleverly designed, comfortable pair of powerful headphones, worthy of their iconic logo and solid enough to garner our Editors' Choice award.