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How to thrive on a Fish-free diet

Once the epitome of uncool, Marillion are now pioneers



Stephen Dalton

There are no goblins guarding the gates to Marillion's secret lair in the rolling depths of Middle England. No cackling old crones casting spells on strangers foolhardy enough to enter this remote Buckinghamshire backwater. No towering battlements topped with boiling oil ready to repel invading hordes of fork-tongued metropolitan rock critics.

A faceless industrial unit outside Aylesbury, rather disappointingly, is where Marillion have based their global empire for the past decade. This is the band's rehearsal space, recording studio, record label and management office combined. Alas, it does not even have a moat.

An affable bunch of divorcees and middle-aged dads, Marillion are as English as a pub darts team. The guitarist Steve Rothery, the keyboard player Mark Kelly and the drummer Ian Mosley share 25 years of history. Even the singer Steve Hogarth, the new boy, has notched up almost two decades of service.

The band have just released their 14th album, *Somewhere Else*, which is really rather good. Containing tracks that shimmer like Coldplay, ache like Radiohead and thunder like Muse, it is better than 80 per cent of this month's releases. But you are unlikely to hear Marillion on British radio, read about them in the music press or see them play a major festival.

This is largely because Marillion have — how can we put this kindly? — an image problem. Their music is still perceived as bloated, bombastic mullet-haired prog-rock, even by people who have never heard it. In fairness, they did once release an album called *Script for a Jester's Tear*. But, come on, we all had bad hair days in the 1980s.

"We have got a bit of a reputation," admits Kelly. "I had a conversation with Noel Gallagher at a party once and said to him, 'I'm in a band but it's the most uncool band in the world — Marillion'. He went, 'Yeah, you're right.' Deadpan! Not even smiling."

"It is kind of like musical leprosy in this country," sighs Hogarth. "But fortunately the rest of the world doesn't share that view."

One key factor in Marillion's perennially naff image is that they are still closely identified with their first singer, Derek "Fish" Dick, even though he left in 1988. "Fish had a personality that appealed to the heavy rock, hard-drinking, Scottish loudmouth sort of . . . er, I'll stop there," says Kelly.

Relations between Fish and his former band were chilly for a decade after their acrimonious divorce, although they have thawed in recent years. "I'm going to his wedding in August," grins Mosley. "I was his best man originally, but he doesn't want me to be this time. He said I put a curse on it last time."

"He hasn't invited me," says Hogarth glumly. Still the new partner in the relationship, even after 19 years.

To tackle the Fish problem, Marillion discussed changing their name after his departure, but eventually decided against it. "Although there's a lot of baggage with the name Marillion, it's probably much better than no baggage at all," shrugs Rothery. "We may be musical Marmite, but at least you've heard of Marmite," grins Kelly.

Let's be frank. Even at their mid-1980s chart peak, Marillion were never cool. But their real problems began with declining commercial fortunes a decade ago. Fifteen years into their career, after eight albums for EMI and three for Castle, their manager advised them to get day jobs to make ends meet. Instead, they sacked him, making an instant saving of 20 per cent. Soon afterwards, they left the label altogether, but only after a brilliant act of guerrilla marketing. Inspired by an unofficial web community of American fans who had donated \$60,000 to subsidise their US tour, the band tapped into the potential of the internet years before most of their peers. Their final album for Castle, released in 1999, was archly titled *Marillion.com*.

"That was all part of our leaving plan," says Rothery. "We had one album to go and we thought the best thing was to turn it into an advert for the fact that we were going to do everything via the internet from then on. They didn't twig it at all."

Necessity being the mother of reinvention, Marillion pioneered a powerful new business model by becoming their own online record label. Armed with thousands of e-mail addresses, they even took the revolutionary step of asking fans to finance recording of their 2001 album, *Anoraknophobia*, by preordering copies 12 months in advance. An impressive 12,000 took the pledge. Years before the rise of MySpace, Arctic Monkeys and Lily Allen, Marillion became unlikely cyber tycoons.

"Everybody talks about Arctic Monkeys becoming huge on MySpace," laughs Kelly. "That's bollocks, of course they didn't. They had a couple of tracks on MySpace and then a big record company push."

Marillion continue to exploit their loyal internet following in innovative ways. Further fan donations helped finance the marketing of their 2004 album, *Marbles*, complete with a targeted e-mail campaign that secured the band their first Top Ten single in 20 years, *You're Gone*. Bypassing conventional concert promoters, they have also hosted four of their biannual Marillion Weekend mini-festivals.

A decade after they were advised to get day jobs, Marillion remain full-time musicians earning more than they ever did as label slaves. How much? "Less than a consultant brain surgeon, more than a milkman," grins Hogarth. They also employ five full-time staff, sell around 100,000 copies of each album and fill venues of 3,000 capacity and bigger.

Most important, they have freed themselves from the "gatekeepers" of public taste such as A&R men and radio pluggers. By turning an image problem into a marketing advantage, Marillion have secured an enviable degree of creative freedom.

"The holy grail is if you can make exactly the music that you want to make, for no other reason than that you want to make it, and still make a living," says Hogarth. "I know a lot of musicians, and they're all jealous."

Jealous of Marillion? That's a phrase you don't hear every day. But love them or loathe them, Marillion are having the last laugh.

Somewhere Else is out on Intact Records (www.marillion.com). They play the Forum,
Highgate Road,