

MARILLION

Guitarist Steve Rothery reflects on 25 years of soaring tone and elusive fame.

BY MICHAEL MUELLER

Marillion is the greatest band you've never heard of." It seems to be a common sentiment among the band's faithful following. Even the people here in the U.S. who have heard of Marillion only remember the band as Genesis-influenced prog-rockers from the early '80s, with a flamboyant, face-painted frontman named Fish. Time for a little refresher course.

After Fish and Marillion went their separate ways in 1988, the band recruited singer Steve Hogarth. Since "H" joined the band, they have released ten studio albums, which in turn reflect the band's constant evolution, from the mellow prog-rock of 1989's *Seasons End* to the more experimental prog-pop sounds (à la Radiohead) of their latest release, *Somewhere Else* (Townsend). And all along the way, Marillion's intensely loyal fans have grown ever more fervent.

So, if you are already a fierce Marillion devotee, *Somewhere Else* should serve to intensify that special relationship. If you still think of jesters' tears and sugar mice when you hear the name Marillion, the record will serve as a long overdue reintroduction to the band. And if you've never heard of Marillion, well, then, as the band says at their Web site, www.marillion.com, it's a love affair waiting to happen.

Tell us about the new record.

This was the first album produced by Mike Hunter. In the past we worked with Dave Megan, who was trained by Trevor Horn, so he's very much of the layering up school.

Sometimes that can sound great, but I prefer a more natural feel; a lot of the guitars from the original guide tracks made it. For the title track, "Somewhere Else," I literally came in and did one take of the guitar that runs all the way through the song, so it's totally improvised.

The album has a big sound.

It's big but in a slightly different kind of way. There aren't very many overdubs on it. We recorded four, five, or six takes of each song, and

on each one I tried a slightly different approach. It drove Mike a little crazy, because I don't actually like knowing what the chords are. If I'm trying to find a melody or a part, I'd prefer to use my ears, because there's more chance of getting something interesting and different that way.

For years you've used a Squier Strat with the EMG pickups and Kahler tremolo. Why Squier instead of Fender?

with an active circuit to switch in, so you've got one position is a mid-boost, the other is a treble and bass boost, and the center position is off. And then you've got the trim pots in the back that determine the amount of gain you want to give the boost. So you can kick in the mid-boost to thicken the sound just enough to give it another character, so it's extremely flexible. I've got two Strats and one Telecaster, all loaded with the Lindy Fralin pickups.



My whole thing about Squiers as opposed to Fenders is that at the end of the day, a guitar is a piece of wood, and you either have good wood or bad wood. Quite often you change your pickups and electronics anyway, so really, having that little transfer on the headstock makes zero difference.

And now you're using Levinson Blade guitars.

Yes, they were handpicked because they just did it for me. They have a passive system

Are you still using the Roland JC-120?

Yes, for the older songs, but for the last three albums I've been using the Groove Tubes Trio preamp and Groove Tubes power amp, through a Marshall 4x12 loaded with Celestion Vintage 30s. The Trio is so versatile; the three channels fall just where you'd want them to be. The tone controls don't do that much alone, but they interact with each other, and the frequencies they've chosen are all based around old vintage Marshalls and Fenders.

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Is that what you used on *Somewhere Else*?

Yes. It's all Groove Tubes. Most of the new album was done with my Blade Tele. It's got more natural twang and sustain than the Strats. Some of the solo sounds are not quite as overdriven as in the past, because you don't need to do that with a Tele, due to its sustain.

Even with the various amps you've used, your lead guitar tone has been fairly consistent across the Marillion catalog.

I think from *Fugazi* (1984) onward, I'd found my sound. The solo sound that I've used really since then, with variations on things like "Easter" [*Seasons End*], "Afraid of Sunlight" [*Afraid of Sunlight*], and "The Great Escape" [*Brave*] is my Squier Strat into a Boss DS-1 distortion into a Boss digital delay into a Roland JC-120. But sound's always been very important to me, and when you're writing, you write differently depending on what sounds you're using. And you feel more inspired if you have something that gives you this fantastic wash of sound. A lot of players don't concentrate enough on getting not only a great sound but also a choice of great sounds to go between for different parts of a song.

Tell us about the delays and chorusing you used to create the textures on *Somewhere Else*.

I used various different pedals and rack effects for this record. One was Roger Linn's Adrenalinn pedal, which has modulation and pulsing kinds of effects, primarily. But what I really like about it is that it syncs to MIDI clock, so when you record backing tracks and everything goes to a tempo map, they send me a clock that corresponds directly to the tempo at which we're recording. What all that means is that the effect pulses and waves in time with the track and creates an amazing groove. A pedal I used for the first time on this album was the Electro-Harmonix POG. That's an interesting sound; not something you'd use that much but it's quite unique for textures. I like to blend just a touch of that sound with our normal, kind of quite clean and slightly delayed sound, for additional thickness. Another sound I use quite a lot is a set of Rockman modules patched into an old Alesis Quadraverb, which gives a very unique, clean, bright, heavily compressed sound. Then there's my Lexicon MPX G2, which is a great-sounding unit by not very well thought-out; it has 300 presets but only 50 user presets—a great idea, guys. I still have my Roland GP-16s, and I also used the Hughes & Kettner Rotosphere quite a lot, as well as the TC Electronic 2290,

which I'd used from *Seasons End* through to about *Radiation* or *Marillion.com*.

Did you use the 2290 for delay or chorus or both?

Primarily delay, but also because it's got five sends and returns, so it's great for routing effects and also the output gain can be set. I'm actually looking forward to trying out the TC Electronic G-System. I might replace some of my rack with one of those for the next tour. I'm getting one in the studio next week to try it out. I tried it when it first came out in L.A., and I

wasn't impressed. But that was in a very busy music store going through a not very good amplifier with a not very good guitar, which can't really teach you much about anything, other than not to go to music stores.

Are you using any stompboxes?

I've got a setup in my home studio, which is sort of a selection of the best custom-switched stompboxes, like Analogman's modified Boss pedals and Keeley's tremolo pedal, which I love. There are various, unusual distortion boxes, and I've got a Boss Digital Dimension C pedal off of eBay, which is quite expensive, but it's got quite an unusual sound.

For the previous two records, the band asked fans to preorder the albums to raise the money needed to make the record. Did you do the same thing with *Somewhere Else*?

No, we decided not to do it. There were various debates, and we seemed to come to the decision that we shouldn't do the preorder. But we just recently had a fanclub convention, which we do every couple of years. This year, 3,000 people flew in to the Netherlands for a three-day event, and that raised us quite a lot of money, which will help with the running of the band.

Did the whole preorder concept come out of the 1997 *This Strange Engine* tour, which was funded in part by your fans?

Yes. That showed us the power of the Internet, and the devotion of our fans. Without that event happening, we wouldn't be having this conversation right now. It forced us to very carefully consider how we could best gain our own independence.

***Somewhere Else* is your 14th album, in a career now spanning 25 years. Is it frustrating that people in the U.S. still don't know and understand Marillion?**

We just don't fit in here, really. We never have. "Kayleigh" was a hit single [in 1985], and therefore the album, *Misplaced Childhood*, did well. But quite often success is driven by being fashionable, and we've never been fashionable. We're not the elder statesmen like the Rolling Stones or Pink Floyd, but we are a band that's been making records for 25 years, and we've become kind of an institution. And that's a good thing, because we've still got 100,000 people around the world who believe very passionately in what we do, and new people are discovering us all the time. We're like the band that won't go away!

MICHEL KOOLEN