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Marillion

Happiness is the Road Volume 2: The Hard Shoulder

Review by Bill Knispel

Happiness is the Road is a double album, it is true. However, it is being released as two separate volumes. *Volume 2* is subtitled *The Hard Shoulder*, and is a far more diverse release. Marillion offers up another nine tracks worked up during the recording sessions, exploring dub and electronica more deeply. Where *Essence* was tightly restrained to a single theme, the songs here fly off in many directions. As such, this album perhaps more than volume 1 shows a fuller range of what the band brings to the table these days.

This ain't your father's Marillion anymore, that's for sure...

Track by Track Review

Thunder Fly

Psychedelic organ, serpentine guitar, tom tom drums, and then...pow! Marillion rocks out in a vague 1960's Southern California surf music manner. No, this isn't "Cannibal Surf Bane" part 2, even if the lyrics are a bit...out there. If you have enjoyed some of the psych covers the band has done in the past (Marillion's covered a number of Syd Barrett and Pink Floyd songs in concert), you'll likely love the path the band took here. I admit that I am not enamoured of the fly-based lyrics, but I can't pull away from the psychedelic musical goodness the band showcases here - so good.

The Man From Planet Marzipan

Where tracks here and there have seen the band adding slight house/dub/electronica influences, those influences are far more at the core of "The Man From Planet Marzipan." When I first heard about this song, I admit to a great degree of skepticism. I'm happy to say my fears were relatively unfounded; while this isn't the next great Marillion song, it's a fine piece of craftsmanship, with pleasant melodies, an infectious beat, and a freshness that sets it apart from the band's regular output. If one looks at *The Hard Shoulder* as an album of experiments, songs like this one and "Thunder Fly" could certainly be seen as successes. It doesn't hurt that they are pretty fine songs on their own, either.

Asylum Satellite #1

This is the second longest composition on all of *Happiness is the Road*, coming in at 9:32. The story of life after the end, the last dregs of society living above it all in a controlled environment, the song showcases some wonderfully scattered Rothery soloing; at his best, he has a way of hitting a note and causing the hair on your arms to stand on end, and for a good few minutes, he does that over and over again until you are almost begging him to step back and let you rest. When he finally does, at 7:09, the release is powerful indeed.

Older Than Me

The first volume of *Happiness is the Road* tells about how pleasure is not in the end, but in the journey itself. "Older Than Me" almost fits that theme in some ways, as lyrically it covers a so-called April/October style romance, with the narrator in love with an older woman, and not caring about what others say. Happiness is in the journey, in the discovery, and what better way is there to discover all that life has to offer than to do so with someone who has seen so much of it? The music is gentle, with chimes, lush vocal arrangements, and a fragility that fits the song wonderfully.

Throw Me Out

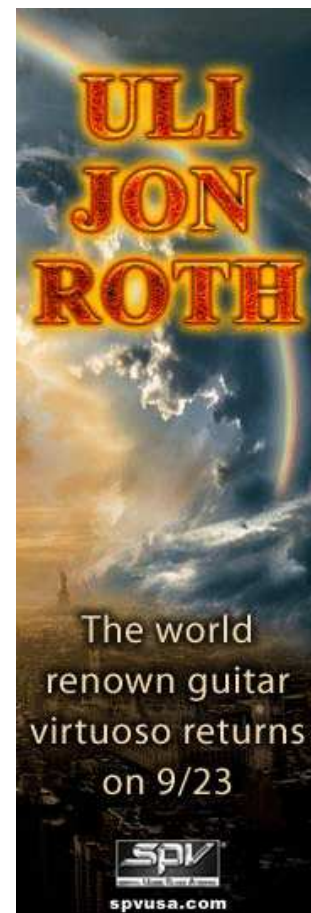
How many break up songs can you think of that use the term biodegrade in them? If ever you needed evidence that this was a prog album, here it is...even break up songs require words with 4 or more syllables. Somehow the song feels somewhat incomplete...it never resolves in a manner with which I am familiar. It's nice enough, but it feels like it needs something more.

Half the World

And then there is a sort of inverse. Here's a song about unrequited love...or is it lust? The band ups the intensity slightly, with crunchy guitar and nicely buzzing synth under the doo-de-doo-doo-doo's and a vaguely island inspired beat. Maybe this is the bit that was missing from "Throw Me out"...here the singer has moved on, looks back without rancor, and hopes that someday friendship can be attained again.



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Whatever is Wrong With You

"Whatever is Wrong With You" was most listener's first exposure to the new Marillion album, as it was released as the lead single. Thus it seemed odd that it came from the non-*Essence* side of the release. This is a solid piece of mid-tempo Marillion rock, with a wildly widdly keyboard line and standard issue Rothery rhythm work. I assert that Steven Rothery is one of the most under-rated guitarists in all of rock music, let alone progressive rock in specific. I don't think this would have fit on the first disc of *HitR*, but it may well be the most solid piece on the whole album.

Especially True

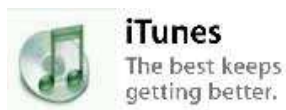
IQ, Pain of Salvation...and now Marillion. Each of these bands has had a song on their latest album speaking directly to or about America. Where PoS's track was fairly damning and angry, and IQ's stern and solemn, Marillion's "Especially True" seems far more wistful and longing, as befits a Marillion track. Musically ornate, with layers of keyboards and guitars, a melodic Trewavas bass drum, and just right drumming from Ian Mosely, the song evokes hope and wishfulness rather than anger and accusation. It's a lovely track, and after the election a few weeks back, the hopeful moments ring even stronger.

Real Tears for Sale

Happiness is the Road closes out with a somber, melancholic look at the seedier side of life. I find this to be a more subtle, mature, wizened look at the same lifestyle the band covered on the song "Berlin" from 1989's *Season's End* (and has it really been 20 years Steve Hogarth has been in the band?)...the skin trade, a lifetime of drinking and living a lie. This piece features one of the most chilling lines I think I have heard in any Marillion song, and in some ways it informs the state of modern life..."Even whores don't kiss with tongues" really says it all about how we live our lives these days. We all put on a face, but that face isn't us. Musically the song is passionate, oozing emotion through the restraints the band has carefully bound around it.



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