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Marillion

Happiness is the Road Volume 1: Essence

Review by Bill Knispel

Marillion has been fairly prolific over the past four or five years, releasing a regular stream of studio albums, live releases, DVDs and so on. When it was announced that the newest studio album would be a double, many people may have raised an eyebrow. After all, *Somewhere Else*, the band's previous studio album, was not widely considered to be among the group's strongest efforts. This may have been compounded by following on the heels of *Marbles*, one of the group's strongest albums (with or without Steve Hogarth on vocals).



Happiness is the Road is a double album, it is true. However, it is being released as two separate volumes. The first volume, which one might consider the album proper, is subtitled *Essence*, and is less a concept album and more a collection of tracks which share a somewhat similar thematic basis. Generally speaking, the songs are slower and a bit more precious than previous releases; Steve Hogarth's vocals are more fragile than ever, there's more piano and gentle instrumentation throughout, and the overall effect sees *Essence* as one of the more somber, delicate releases from a band that has crafted a career on exploring the melancholy, darker side of personal experience.

Track by Track Review

Dreamy Street

The stage is set right from the get go with a delicate piano and vocals ballad. This is one of the most subtle album openers in the band's oeuvre, and in some ways hearkens back to the opening moments of "Script for a Jester's Tear" from 1983. This is gentler and more subtle by far, evoking a feeling of internal hurt and despair rather than anger at loss.

This Train is my Life

Travel is a metaphor throughout the album. The album's title, *Happiness is the Road*, even brings this to the fore...happiness is not in ending the journey, it is in the journey itself. Hogarth's lyrics strike close to the heart, begging the listener to join him on his journey. The music is almost Beatles-ish, with flanged piano and keyboards, and a gently growing, building arrangement. Steve Rothery's solo 4 minutes in eschews much of the weepy, Gilmour-esque influences he has made part of his CV for many years, sounding more angular and thrashy than previous efforts. It suits the song wonderfully.

Essence

If ever a Marillion song deserved the label chamber pop, this one might be it. The arrangement is a touch baroque, circling and cycling as it builds slowly, layer after layer of instrumentation helping to construct a track that is more complex than it sounds. There's great use of dynamics here; the song builds to a false climax 2:30 in before everything drops out, leaving keyboard stabs and quiet guitar as a backing for Hogarth's fragile vocals. The diversity in this song is key; the fact that it shifts so easily from gentle fragility to passionately powerful moments makes this a great composition, and proof positive that Marillion is still at or near the top of their game musically.

Wrapped up in Time

Another gentle opening, this time with chimes or sleigh bells intoning the main theme, "Wrapped Up in Time" also features nice use of Fripp-like soundscapes and a heartbeat rhythm underneath lyrics about the loss of time and life lost in time. Like much of Marillion's recent output, the song builds from the quiet opening to embrace a touch more power. It would be nice to see (or rather, hear) Steve Hogarth push things vocally a bit more; he has a lovely singing voice, but some of his finest moments have been when he lets loose and starts to scream.

Liquidity

"Liquidity" is a gentle instrumental aperitif that clears things out from "Wrapped up in Time," and sets the stage for the following piece. Rothery offers up some subtle, slippery slide guitar, while Mark Kelly and Hogarth both contribute layered keys.

Nothing Fills the Hole

Great Hogarth vocals, ornate organ tones, a militaristic drum beat on snare, George Harrison-like guitar..."Nothing Fills the Hole" has all the ingredients for a fantastic piece of late period Marillion. Does

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it deliver? I think so. Lyrically, the song tells a tale that far too many of us are familiar with; we want something so bad that it is all we think about. When we get it, there's nothing to fill that need, that desire, that want.

Woke Up

Finally Marillion rocks out somewhat. We have suitably crunchy, slightly slashing guitar chords, a nicely pulsing Pete Trewavas bass line, and more restrained keyboards. This is Marillion in rock mode, and it's a relief to see that they can still bring it. Of course, the rhythms are still somewhat mid-tempo, but the mix of Marillion rock and light use of some electronica influences make this an infectious composition indeed.

Trap the Spark

"Trap the Spark" arrives from the ashes of the previous track, and in some ways it almost seems a response to "Nothing Fills the Hole." This song is the story of the man still dreaming great dreams, wanting to touch the treasures of the world, to see all that life has to offer, to trap the spark that makes life worth living and hold it close. In doing so, one risks losing that which makes that spark so vital, so worth attaining. Again, it is the journey, not the destination, which makes it all worthwhile.

A State of Mind

Throughout *Essence* we have confronted the idea that life is about more than the end of the journey, but rather about the journey itself. The preceding tracks have seen Hogarth telling stories of people who have searched for their desire, to find that it leaves a hole when attained, or trying to capture the spark that drives exploration to discover that it can never be trapped. Realisation is starting to creep in lyrically that there's something more, and that it's all about a "State of Mind." The music is again vaguely Beatles-esque in many ways, and lush choral vocals and some fantastic keyboard playing and arranging from Mark Kelly add import and intensity to the composition. This is in many ways the turning point of the album, and as such is a powerful song indeed.

Happiness is the Road

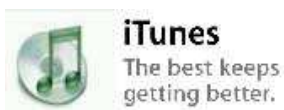
We close out things with the album's title track, which sums up the entire journey so far. The lyrics say it best; "Happiness ain't the end of the road/Happiness IS the road." The lyrics here are such a mantra of affirmation...you are not your pain, you are not your mind. Every individual is a universe in and of themselves, worthy of exploration and worth the journey. The longest track on the entire album (inclusive of *Volume 2*) at just over 10 minutes, Marillion takes the time necessary to close things out properly, with all the traditional Marillion elements in full effect. It's lush, orchestral, alternately precious and fragile and impassioned and powerful. In the end, it is a Marillion mini-epic of the finest kind.

Half Full Jam

Now if only we had more tracks like this on the album. Throughout the entire release, Marillion has crafted some gorgeous pieces of pop and electronica inspired proggy goodness, but rarely did the band rock out. They saved the best for last, in some ways, with this jam-based track that features some of the most impassioned screaming Hogarth vocals heard in years, with the band unleashing their own slightly restrained fury. Guitars slash, the drums pound, and Hogarth sounds vaguely unhinged. It's a shame this is only a bonus track...a few more pieces like this on *Essence* would have balanced things nicely.



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