



A Marillion miles to rock happiness

Two-disc "Happiness is the Road" keeps these Brits on the map

Anyone remember that Fish guy? The original Marillion vocalist?

Me neither.

Now settled in their third decade with singer Steve "H" **Hogarth**, Marillion has become a more-than-comfortably established musical empire unto itself. They don't need major labels or street cred from hipsters, or media hype. And at last the band has erased the albatross of their long-ago Fish-ness. You'll never hear me mention Fish again.

(Fish who?)

You either love Marillion with H or you don't - and if, like myself and thousands of others, you do, then, of course, you already know their long-awaited new, two-volume release, "Happiness is the Road," is out and very, very good.

You've probably been listening to it relentlessly, debating whether volume one, subtitled "Essence," is better than volume two, which is called "The Hard Shoulder." Not to mention where it fits in the band's catalog - one which explores all of the best ambient, melodic and experimental textures of the oft-maligned "if you must call it prog" style of music we call, uhm, prog.

Hogarth himself is quite pleased with "Happiness is the Road," particularly considering that, way back when he first joined the band in 1988, he could never have envisioned the road - the meandering happiness highway of Marillion - would have endured.

"No, I would never have believed we'd still be doing this," he says by phone from England. "I just thought, let's see what happens. You can't think more than that in rock 'n' roll. No one goes in with a 10-year master plan, much less 20."

Along with Hogarth, Marillion is guitarist Steve Rothery, bassist Pete Trewavas, drummer Ian Mosley and keyboardist Mark Kelly. The band has its own label and one of the most visionary web sites and interactive fan bases in all of music.

Given that "Happiness is the Road" is very much a meditation on the entire approach to longevity - musical and otherwise - the actual evolution of the two discs was very much a spontaneous occurrence. There were several finished tracks left over from the previous studio album,

"Somewhere Else," and the band liked the shelved material sufficiently that they wanted to put it out.

"The original plan was to just write a couple of whoppers and just include them with the stuff we already had," **Hogarth** says. "But once we got into jamming, we tapped into something of a creative vein and ended up with much more than we needed." Ultimately, they hit on the idea of releasing two distinctly different albums simultaneously under the "Happiness is the Road" umbrella.

The Marillion songwriting process is time-honored within the ranks of the band. They simply assemble and jam, recording everything for scrutiny. "It's absolutely an in-the-moment approach," Hogarth says. "I sit in the corner with all my scraps of lyrics and laptop while the boys are jamming, and I'll find a certain mood or feel and just go with it. All the melodies come out of the air."

While he admits that listening to hours of session playbacks gets tedious, Hogarth says the end result is very rewarding. "You hear those good accidents where everything worked and all five sets of ears will perk up. Then you refine and edit and play with those aural collisions and eventually, we run out of things to criticize and we look at each other and there's nothing more we can do. It's an album."

"Essence" is the more poppy of the two discs, with several tunes of gorgeous keyboard and guitar arpeggios and those effortless, flying-carpet Hogarth hooks. "The Hard Shoulder" is more reminiscent of the band's spacier atmospherics and reflects the sort of soundscapes one associates with Pink Floyd or Radiohead.

Both work separately or in partnership - to the pleasurable extent that "Happiness is the Road" earns a spot alongside "Marbles" and "Afraid of Sunlight" at the top of the band's considerable catalog.

Throughout the sessions, Hogarth had been doing a bit of soul-searching and hit a thematic, lyrical groove. The songs began to reflect that spirit on both discs - that it's easy to overlook the magic of life as it happens while you're looking forward and waiting for something Great to happen.

"It's fairly simple, actually," Hogarth says. "People worry about goals or set goals and work towards them - and that's fine - but to conceptualize something in the future as the payoff means you're missing out. Whatever your dream is, you may not ever get exactly what you dreamed of. The peace is in the moment and you've got to wring the juice out of each moment."

Hogarth understands the pitfalls of undertaking perceived motifs of heaviosity.

"Maybe the lyrics on this album are too didactic for folks," he says. "You know: 'We don't need some rock singer telling us how to lead our lives.' But hell, I'm not a young man anymore. My marriage broke down, I lost my parents and I've been on the road for 30 years. Maybe I have a perspective that is worth sharing whereas, before, it wasn't."

- Rick Koster