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Marillion takes the long road to 'Happiness,' part 1

March 06, 2009

by Bryan Reesman



Prog-rock band Marillion celebrates its 30th anniversary this year. Photo: Carl Glover.

Marillion has toured the world over, sold millions of albums, played to audiences as large as 150,000 people, and recorded one of the most famous progressive rock albums ever.

Through savvy Internet know-how, the band has raised money from fans for tours, albums and publicity and reaped stronger dividends working outside of the major label system. Fans flock from around the world to attend their semi-annual Marillion weekend conventions.

Marillion is listed in the Guinness Book of World Records for the quickest manufacture of a DVD (63 hours, 29 minutes from the videotaping of a live convention show to stocking it in a store), will celebrate its 30th anniversary this year, and the band has just released its 15th studio album, a two-CD affair that is appropriately titled *Happiness Is The Road*.

Despite all of this, Marillion steadfastly remain a cult band, particularly in America, where the group can still play the same venues but will forever be remembered for the stunning 1985 masterpiece *Misplaced Childhood* and the melancholy hit single "Kayleigh," which inspired a generation of fans to bequeath that name on their daughters.

But to assume the saga ended there does a huge disservice to the British band and the vast catalog it has amassed since that time. Many fans remain fanatic followers after three decades.

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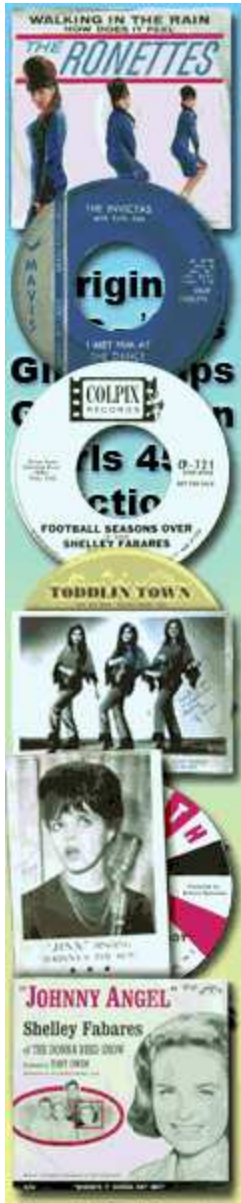
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"I think with what we do, not everyone gets it, but if people get it they tend to get it completely and have great loyalty," states guitarist and founding member Steve Rothery. "And I think trust, as well. We've made 15 albums now, and one of the things that sets us apart as a band is that there is a remarkable consistency to the albums. Not every album is a work of genius, but I think there are least two or three great songs on every record, and I think that goes a long way to inspiring a level of dedication. Our audience has a lot of passion for what we do. They really do feel it. We notice at the concerts that people are living it."

The group's rabid fanbase has eaten up numerous special releases, such as fan-club CDs, Christmas albums, live DVDs, concert downloads, rarities and remixes, and special editions. The deluxe edition of *Happiness Is The Road*, packaged with two books featuring lyrics and gorgeous art and photos, certainly was not cheap, but Marillion sold out of its initial 15,000-copy run and printed up 3,000 more. So far a saturation of its hardcore fanbase has yet to occur.

Many of the faithful often travel to England, or this year to Canada or the Netherlands, to indulge in the semi-annual Marillion Weekend, where the group meets and interacts with followers, plays lesser-known songs and even performs albums like *Brave* and *Afraid Of Sunlight* in their entirety.

Bassist Pete Trewavas says that Marillion's following is like "a big global family. It sounds like a cliché, but it really is. What we've found over the years is the closer we get, the nicer the people are. We're very fortunate because we have great fans on pretty much every level. They inspire us and have so much faith in us that it allows us to have faith in them. Those feelings are two-way. On a personal level, they're really nice people to hang out with."

"It's an amazing party atmosphere," says Rothery of the Marillion Weekends, which started near the beginning of the decade. "Having 2,000 or 3,000 of your most dedicated fans flying in from all around the world creates such a great vibe. The band is usually in top form and socializing with the fans. You'll find me in the bar afterwards 'til about 2 or 3 in the morning signing stuff.

Unfortunately there is not much time for drinking anything, but it's a great experience for everyone."

Part of what holds Marillion together after all these years is not only the camaraderie within the band and between its fans, but the freedom they give each other with their individual input as well as their ability to do side projects (including, among others, *The Wishing Tree*, *Transatlantic*, *Iris*, *H Band*, and various solo efforts) to explore ideas that would not make it into the group.

All of the group members acknowledged these things during their individual interviews.

"The beauty of Marillion is that we're not stuck in any one style, which is always interesting, and we're not tied to how we have to play," remarked Trewavas. "I can go completely off the scale and play something quite mad — unless it's completely horrible and alien to what the song requires — and no one's looking over my shoulder. So we have a lot of freedom, but, ultimately, you're your own taskmaster. I want to be proud of it."

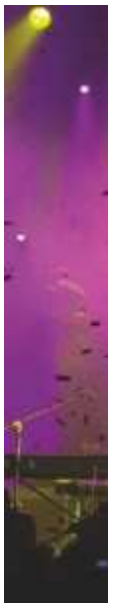
Progressive evolution

Throughout its long and storied career, Marillion has always followed its own path.

Founded in 1979, the group solidified its lineup by 1984 with Rothery, Trewavas, keyboardist Mark Kelly, drummer Ian Mosley and singer/lyricist Fish, releasing four studio albums and a slew of singles. While the first two albums, *Script For A Jester's Tear* (1983) and *Fugazi* (1984), offered some dynamic, dramatic, and heavy modern prog sounds with intricate wordplay



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and emotional vocals, *Misplaced Childhood* (1985) became the group's watershed release, a concept album revolving around a relationship break-up that leads to a journey of self discovery. "Kayleigh" became the group's major international hit.

The followup album *Clutching At Straws* (1987) was another moody masterpiece, but an album whose dark overtones, ambient trippiness and heavy lyrics made it less chart-worthy in America. Following this studio effort, artistic differences lead to Fish, the group's towering Scottish singer, departing. With him went their heavier prog leanings and jester imagery, and the group brought in former Europeans frontman Steve Hogarth (now also known as "H"), whose vocal stylings and lyrical ruminations went in a different direction than those of Fish.

While many groups who become famous with a certain lineup often flounder after a famous frontman departs, Marillion held its own. *Seasons End* (1989) found the band expanding its atmospheric sounds and reflecting a more upbeat tone, while *Holidays In Eden* (1991) found Marillion swimming in pop waters. But it was clear that fans liked the group's more indulgent side, and its next two albums were both concept-oriented and more musically intense — *Brave* (1994), a dramatic, album-long story of lost identity, abuse and emotional turmoil, and *Afraid Of Sunlight* (1995), which grappled more loosely with the concept and price of fame — both of which stand out in the Marillion continuum and are considered classics.

But by this point, despite its artistic triumphs, the group's sales were not strong enough to remain at the major-label level. So EMI parted ways with the group, who also chose to chart new directions for themselves.

Marillion signed with Velvel Records for *This Strange Engine* (1997) then moved over to Castle Communications for *Radiation* (1998) and *Marillion.com* (1999). The band's first self-released effort came in the form of *Anoraknophobia* (2001), which was the first album to list the name of every person who pre-ordered the release (a tradition which continues to this day).

The Marillion of this period bore less resemblance to the atmospheric group of the mid-'90s and the more full-blown prog of the '80s. Indeed, *Radiation*, an album with many direct, harder rock tunes, was the first album beyond *Holidays In Eden* to generate controversy among the faithful.

"I sometimes think we are going to freak out the 'Freaks,'" Hogarth said at the time about their loyal followers (named after a Fish-era song). "But I quite delight in the idea of that rather than out of any concern."

"It was a time when the band was going through quite a gray area," said Mosley of the *Radiation* period. "We had left EMI and were signing to indie labels, and I think we were just trying to find our feet and were unsure what kind of direction we were meant to be going in. I didn't really like the sound of the record. We had it remixed and remastered for America, and it sonically sounded more pleasant to me. But I didn't like the way the album started. I thought it was a very good idea, but it was my least favorite."

The post-*This Strange Engine* period also solidified Marillion as a group that continually liked to explore new territories and not stay pegged within a genre or a style — take as examples the dissonant rock of "Under The Sun" (*Radiation*), the jazzy "House" (*Marillion.com*), and the funk-laced "Quartz" (*Anoraknophobia*).

Then, Marillion's vibrant 2004 classic *Marbles* brought back the dreamy sounds of *Clutching At Straws*, albeit with a more upbeat slant and far more epic tracks — indeed, over the years, the group has never shied away from tossing in a 10- or 15-minute epic here and there — while *Somewhere Else* (2007) took a darker, contemplative turn with slightly edgier rock sounds, reflective of Hogarth's dissolving marriage. In a sense, it was his own



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Misplaced Childhood at a later stage in life.

The group's latest effort, *Happiness Is The Road*, is a musically diverse double album split between a concept disc reflecting Hogarth's newfound lease on life and a collection of unrelated songs. It is the second Marillion release to be produced by Mike Hunter, who produced *Somewhere Else* and also mixed a majority of *Marbles* and assistant engineered on *Brave*.

The generally low-key album traverses numerous musical styles and features organic instrumentation like French horn and dulcimer that normally isn't heard on a Marillion album.

"It's great working with Mike Hunter because he encouraged us to use real instruments as much as possible," explains Rothery. "It gives the songs a certain character you might not otherwise get in a digital world where everything is sampled and sounds perfect. Sometimes having those little sonic inconsistencies can be a good thing. They help in trying to build the character of a song."

Hogarth felt that Hunter injected energy, freshness and enthusiasm into the recording process, which is what the band wanted.

The album's standout track for Rothery and Mosley, not to mention this writer, is the psychedelic "Asylum Satellite #1," the third track on disc two, which has a more ethereal, electronic feeling.

"It's a real fun one to play live," said Rothery. "That and 'Trap The Spark' were actually two of the last things that were written at the very end of the writing sessions for the new record. I didn't feel that there was enough guitar on the record, to tell you the truth, and I think it works well. Whenever we play it live I always improvise the end solo; so it's always a challenge."

Mosley concurred that "Asylum Satellite #1" is "one of those tracks that works consistently live. Every time we've played it, it just does it for me. The solo is different every night, so it gives us room to maneuver a little bit. It's not set in concrete."

Even though the description of the Marillion saga makes it sound like the group was destined to write and play music for decades, there was a time when the band was not sure what was going to happen. An unlikely savior arrived in the form of the Internet, which in the late '90s was causing upheaval because illegal downloading had become a growing and substantial problem for the music industry. But, by kismet, Marillion made use of online forums in groundbreaking and unexpected ways.

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