

MARILLION - STEVE HOGARTH

Interview by MARK BAYROSS

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It may surprise some of you to hear that Marillion - the band who for most people still evoke memories of Fish in a kilt singing KAYLEIGH on TOP OF THE POPS back in the eighties - are not only still around, but have a legion of die-hard fans around the world. Fans who have proved sufficiently numerous and devoted to personally shell out for the band to tour America, and in a piece of music industry history, to pay in advance for the entire production of their last (12th) studio album.

I spoke to Steve Hogarth, the man who has led Marillion since the late eighties, about the release of their latest live album, the Internet, and, of course, their fans.

What was behind the decision to release ANORAK IN THE UK LIVE?

We've made four studio albums since the last live album, so we thought it was about time we released another one. We are a live animal, really - we're the only band in the history of rock and roll to sell out the Hammersmith Odeon [London] before getting a record deal... There's such an amazing atmosphere and we thought it was worth capturing that vibe. We also felt that we hadn't yet made the definitive live album, and now we've done it with this one, or at least as close as it is possible to... We were also lucky that the night we played the Manchester Academy was a great gig!

Of course this album includes much of your ANORAKNOPHOBIA album, which was financed by your fans...

Yes. It's funny that that has been hailed by people in the business world as some kind of new business model! Really, the idea grew out of what happened with our American fans - back in '97 they raised \$60,000 for us to tour the US. It was a wake-up call for us - suddenly we discovered that there was something bigger out there than we had imagined... So when we got out of our record deal, after MARILLION.COM, we had three contracts on the table, but we wanted to find an alternative to just signing with another label. We kind of knew what to expect - we'd get an advance, but there would be very little effort to push us afterwards - it wouldn't have made much of a difference. So we didn't feel like signing another deal. Instead we asked the fans - we wrote them an email and asked what they thought of this. We did a poll and the reaction was so positive - we got 6,000 replies in two days - that we decided to go ahead with it and ask them to pre-pay for the album. This way, we sold around 13,000 copies directly to the fans and we put their names on a thanks list on the album sleeve. So the hardcore fans got something out of it by getting involved and getting name-checked. I can imagine how they felt seeing their names on there - when I was young I was a huge fan of the Beatles and I know how I would have felt if my name had appeared on one of their records! Everyone benefited - the fans got a 2CD deal and we were able to reward them for their faith; we were able to produce the record then go to EMI and get a distribution deal; and EMI were happy because they got a record to market and put in the shops without having to pay an advance. To date, they have sold another 75,000 copies - it's sold more than MARILLION.COM.

Do you think this has this changed your relationship with your fans?

Oh, definitely. A couple of weekends ago we did a holiday weekend with the fans and we sold all 1,800 tickets. For a hundred quid, they got chalet accommodation and four shows, plus a bunch of other bands playing - White Buffalo, The Wishing Tree, Cry No More, The Bays and The Itch. When we weren't playing we spent the weekend with the fans, signing autographs and so on - everyone had a great time. It's amazing - we get real affection from our fans.

Why do you think you've amassed such a devoted following?

Cos we're good, to be honest! Not that I want to sound arrogant...! There's been a stigma attached to Marillion since the eighties. When people think of us, they think of prog-rock, they think of KAYLEIGH, LAVENDER and all that. It's amazing the amount of people with nieces called Kayleigh, you know! It's funny because although it was a name Fish made up, it became like the third most popular girl's name in the eighties...! But anyway, we've always had an image problem with the public and with the music business in general. People think we're a bunch of prog hippies. They just don't know the reality: the amount of people who have said to me "I heard the new album and I didn't realise it was you"...! We know we make music that appeals to a lot of people, it's just getting it to them that's the problem. People know that the words are true and real - none of it's made up - there's no formula there. We're not some desperate act trying to push a button with the public...we write from the heart. But I'm not sure why we seem to have such a connection with people - I guess you'd have to ask the fans!

Did you feel a much greater pressure to deliver on ANORAKNOPHOBIA given that your fans had already put their money and faith into the record?

No, not really, because every record is the most important I've ever made, you know? I always feel that I have to create something that's more potent than the last record, a better piece of ...work...I say "work" because it really can be! [Laughs] It's certainly not a learned process - it's not like being a carpenter - if you can hang a door, you can hang a door... I have written around 100 songs now and I still don't have a clue how to do it! I sometimes get a terrible tightening when I have to write - there's a deadline to meet and I need to force some kind of creation. I think the desire to excel has always driven me.

There's a ton of information on your official website and you called the album before this one MARILLION.COM - how important do you think the Internet has been to the band?

It's saved us! We've had our '40 years in the wilderness' stint - every artist has to do that, although some seem to ride through it. Actually, only one really springs to mind and that's Sting! [Laughs] Mind you, he's occasionally pulled some dodgy stunts - he's done some really tacky things at times...! [Laughs] I think we've done that Van Morrison / Neil Young thing...carrying on doing our own thing while the world looks the other way for ten years, then everyone looks back and goes "oh, you're still here!" It's forced us to innovate and find a way to reach people that's outside of the usual mechanisms. We haven't had poster or press campaigns. We were one of the first bands to embrace the Internet, back in '97 - back then, the Internet was seen as something a bit nerdy; now, of course, it's very trendy - and we got our website up and running in '98. It's been wonderful - it's allowed us to talk straight to the fans - and of course, it's global, so we've been able to stay in touch with a global fanbase. When we put on the Marillion Weekend, we had people from the US, Brazil, Mexico, Australia, Japan, from all over the world...coming to Pontins! It was bizarre! Of course the other thing about the Internet is that you can send an email and get a reply in a day. You can use that to communicate directly with 20,000 people - that's a very powerful tool - and get feedback almost straight away. Imagine trying to write and send 20,000 letters...not only would it take weeks, it would cost thousands just for the stamps!

With such an extensive back catalogue, how do you decide what to play live?

Only about 5% of it is an on-the-night thing. A lot of the technological stuff dictates that - keyboards have to be programmed, as do the guitar effects - it's not something you can do on the fly. I guess that may change - as the technology improves and the level of storage goes up, we could take all our sounds on the road with us. We're not the most retentive five people in the world...[laughs]...so that kind of limits the choice! I guess a good 95% of it is fixed. So, we decide in advance what we personally feel like playing. We've also at times sent out an email asking fans which songs they wanted to hear (and which ones they didn't!) - that sometimes helps because our votes are often split. We all have different agendas - Ian, for instance, wants to play songs that have different drumming, not 4/4 all the time...I can imagine how tedious that must get! So asking the fans helps because that often sways it. Having said that, we mustn't overdo it with asking the fans - we should surprise them a bit too.

You have said that your music has become more influenced by blues and jazz over time. Where do you go to look for new musical inspiration?

I don't think I deliberately go looking for it - I'll listen to anything out there that grabs my attention. It's just a case of finding something - in my case Massive Attack - that you think is amazing. When I first heard that I got a real sense of it feeling honest and innovative. I also really like Björk - everything she does is interesting, and she seems to do it without any feeling of self-consciousness. Like, if she wants to do a big band swing number, she'll do just that. If someone like Robbie Williams does it, it just becomes showbiz; but Björk's like a wild animal! She's wild and creative...it comes kicking its way through the door! You never know what's she's going to do next, but it's always good. Although, one thing I would say is that she's not a great lyricist, but she always comes up with great sounds and approaches to music.

What are you listening to at the moment, and will any of it influence the sound of the new album?

Not a lot, really. Actually I'm listening to the new h live album (Steve's solo project, not that clown from Steps...!) Dave Meegan's mixing it and it's coming along nicely! So, I'm shooting back and forth between here in Oxfordshire and London, sometimes twice a day...I'm sure the cameras on the motorway are wondering what that red blur is they keep seeing...[laughs] But it's sounding really good anyway! It's not giving me much time to listen to new things, though...to be honest, there ain't much around that knocks me out...Radiohead's THE BENDS; Jeff Buckley's GRACE; the "POSES" album by Rufus Wainwright...that's a great record! What else...? I still listen to my old Beatles records, my Joni Mitchell, Prefab Sprout, Talk Talk...some of the best things came out in the eighties...Talk Talk, Talking Heads, Blue Nile...I think Paul Buchanan is a great singer! It's funny that people seem to need to be gratified in a minute these days - maybe in the future music will just be a strobe flash into people's brains...bang! "That was a great album...!" Ha ha! [Much laughter] Anyway, I know you'd love me to give you a hint of what the next Marillion album is going to be like, but I'm afraid I can't right now...just rest assured we'll be in the studio this year, ferreting away for gold...

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