



Marillion: Doing Business With Their Fans

People + Opinion : Artists / Engineers / Producers / Programmers

Published in SOS September 2003
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Depending on your point of view, prog-rock survivors Marillion are the least cool band in the world — or the best kept secret in the music industry. They've certainly found a different way of doing music for a living...

Big George Webley

When it comes to a lasting career in the music industry, what are we talking about? A couple of instant hits, followed by obscurity for a couple of decades, until the opportunity to stand in a line-up on *Never Mind The Buzzcocks* comes along and your final 30 seconds of fame is acted out as the butt end of a Mark Lamarr joke.



Or do you desire something more substantial? Like what? The Rolling Stones, a band who have been around since before electricity was invented, and are still packing them to the rafters? Maybe Sting, who just seems able to keep going and going, right up there, without actually eclipsing his days in the Police? Or what about U2? They've gone from a dodgy Dublin pub to a decade dominating the globe, armed only with a root note, a straight beat, an echo pedal and some sunglasses.

These artists seemingly do whatever they like, without having to kiss up to A&R departments or having to agree with stupid marketing strategies. For most signed acts it's most certainly not like that. Their every move is dictated by management teams, lawyers, record company executives, producers and promotion strategists. Every percentage, copyright claim and loophole is tied up for all eternity. As for musical vision, what's that?

top Introducing The Band

How best to describe Marillion's music? How long is a piece of string! It is certainly the most untouched-by-market-forces music with six-figure sales around. Some say it has "all the elements of Led Zeppelin orchestrated by Schubert in space", others might describe it as "beautifully crafted and exquisitely performed adult rock" and you wouldn't be far off saying that "it's reminiscent of Pink Floyd during their most creative period, without the inflated pig". But as Billy Joel wrote so eloquently in his song 'It's Still Rock & Roll To Me', "You can't get the sound from a story in a magazine." So to introduce new fans to the music Marillion have been making over the past 15 years, they have a free CD. It's called *Crash Course: An Introduction To Marillion*. To receive the free CD all you have to do is send your full name, postal address and birth date to [Click here to email.com](#).

There are numerous audio clips on their web site to check out too. It's probably the most user-friendly, honest and regularly updated web site any band has ever had. Apart from a comprehensive look at what they're up to, what they've been up to, and who they are, they have their own shop selling records, DVDs, T-shirts, books and bottle openers.

www.marillion.com

top Parallel Worlds

So imagine how the fortunes of the Rolling Stones would have differed if Mick Jagger had left the band after 'Honky Tonk Women'. What would the rest of the Police or U2 have done if Sting had gone solo after 'Walking On The Moon', or Bono had jumped ship the day after 'New Year's Day'? Would the other members of these bands have stayed together, let alone gone on to carve out a truly Utopian situation within the music industry? Could they have found the freedom to record the songs they wanted, at the time that they wanted, in their own studio, making all their own decisions, and with a connection with their fans that is surely 'unique'?

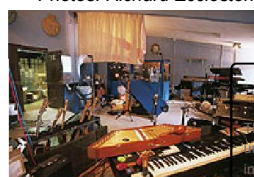
Well that's exactly what happened to Marillion. Now at this stage, you will fall into one of three camps:

1. Didn't they split up after Fish left the band?
2. Who are Marillion?
3. Fantastic, at last, some press on the most untouched-by-commercial-pressures band on the planet!

The majority of acts that have made it past two decades are either bloated caricatures of their former selves, going through the motions whenever a property tax bill hits the doormat, or touring relentlessly banging out all the old hits in a cabaret style, or finding ever more unlikely collaborations to keep themselves fresh. Marillion, however, are as alive creatively as they have ever been. Only more so.

They started out in the early '80s. Yes, for all you purists out there, there were musical incarnations featuring one or more members of the band making a racket in the late '70s, but their first record was released in 1982 (for those wishing to know more about Marillion's past, every sordid detail is superbly exposed in the Jon Collins tome *Separated Out 1979-2002*, published by Helter Skelter).

Photos: Richard Ecclestone



The huge live area in Marillion's Racket Club Studios.

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The secret of their early success was, as it always should be, a lot of practice to hone their musical skills, single-minded determination and unquestioning belief in their destiny, against all the odds. Keyboard player Mark Kelly says "I had no doubt we were going to become famous. All my memories of those early times were of [original lead singer] Fish on the phone badgering promoters for gigs and general plans for world domination." So successful were they at hustling that they sold out what was then the Hammersmith Odeon before they'd released their first album.

They saw promotion as being crucial to their development, so much so that apart from their own concentrated efforts, they employed publicity agent Keith Goodwin before getting signed to a label — common practice nowadays, but as unlikely at the beginning of the '80s as a local band playing live on Radio One in prime-time. Yet it was on Tommy Vance's *Friday Rock Show* that they got their first national break, shortly before EMI signed them up for a five-album deal. The good side of the deal was that they retained artistic control; the bad side was a poor royalty rate and the total loss of ownership of all their work for ever and ever. But who cares? They had a deal with a major label and top-line studios and big-shot producers awaited!

Despite the fact they were totally out of step with the British music scene at the time, their first couple of albums sold moderately well and the follow-up live album not only consolidated their position, but increased their unit-shifting potential. But it wasn't until their third studio album *Misplaced Childhood* that they exploded, thanks to the power of a hit single. 'Kayleigh' became their golden egg, raising albums sales more than 10 times, stimulating a rush on their back catalogue and hastening the end of part one for the band.



The control room at Racket Club Studios.

The reasons for Fish leaving Marillion are well documented, but in short it was the old chestnut of musical differences — which, in reality, meant he no longer saw himself as 20 percent of a band.

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Neither Fish Nor Flesh

The job of replacing one of the most recognisable singers in rock was a task and a half. For the direct approach, they put an ad in the classifieds of *Melody Maker*: "Singer wanted by Marillion, send tape to...". From gravel-voiced rock wailers to people who dressed up like the album sleeves, every conceivable type of vocalist applied; but as it turned out, it was an industry insider who solved their dilemma. Darryl Way from Curved Air knew the singer/keyboard player from the Europeans, who had just split. The singer's next venture, a typical two-poops-and-a-synthesizer band, hadn't worked out, which, coupled with becoming a father, had led him to consider packing it all in to become a milkman, which was a steady job at the time.

Of course, getting a milk round isn't the easiest thing to do, especially around Christmas time (when the tips can be tremendous) and at the same time as Marillion were courting him, there was an offer of an American tour with The The as keyboard player. What should he do: try another dairy, learn 18 songs on the keyboards and have a pressure-free trip around the better hotels of America, or step into a very large pair of shoes?



Kebab Vans One and Two, home of the Marillion business empire.

He decided that honesty was the best policy and told them he didn't think joining Marillion would be right for either party. But it niggled him for a while, and the band were sure he was the right man for the job. So with Darryl Way again acting as the go-between, they got together. They took themselves off to one of those middle-of-nowhere type places for a few weeks to see whether the chemistry was right. The band weren't looking for a Fish-a-like singer, and they knew they weren't going to get one.

Musically, it was all they dreamed it could be, but the band liking the direction their new singer was leading them was one thing. How would the fans take it? After a low-key, unannounced gig in a pub, their first real performance was in front of the Dutch fan club secretary and a bunch of hardcore fans. They loved him, and he fell in love with them and all they and the band stood for. He brought a new poetry to the band, a deeper commitment, a sense of loyalty and a contemporary approach to their music. His name was Steve Hogarth, aka H.

At this point in history (1988), the contract with EMI still had a couple of albums to go (plus as many compilations as you can package, but we'll come to them in a moment). Both Marillion as a unit with their new singer, and their old singer Fish, relaunching himself as a solo act, were now two pieces of EMI property. Another way of seeing this was hedging bets, but it did mean there was an album to be delivered by the band, namely the highly acclaimed and massive-selling *Season's End*.

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Tough At The Top

Having a hardcore fan base is a guarantee of healthy first-week sales, but it also means the promotion machine of a label can go to sleep. Why bother promoting a Marillion album or tour, when all you need to do is put a free ad in the fanzine? Immediately there are hundreds of thousands of sales and every tour date is sold out. No need to place adverts in the likes of *Mojo*, *Q*, and the *NME*, or get teams of fly-poster monkeys to blitz every city and town in the country.

The problem with this policy of saving money (which comes out of the record company's cut) is that you only reach the dedicated fans and don't stimulate any new ones. When the EMI deal ran out, despite shifting over 10 million albums, Marillion were in debt — and no, they hadn't blown it on private jets and worldwide housing portfolios. They decided to make future albums themselves and licence them through Castle, which seemed a good idea at the time as they would get a much bigger cut of the profits. After a couple of albums and a different set of frustrations, however, the band decided to take care of business themselves. Quite literally, they manage themselves, with each individual member taking care

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of a specific area of business: web site, accounts, and so on. They also have an outlet for any musical differences they might have in the guise of solo projects, which are released through their label Racket Records.

At around the same time the band took control of their destiny, EMI were looking to release a best of Marillion. Enter Lucy Jordache, a fan from the very beginning. The first single she ever bought was the band's debut 'Market Square Heroes', although she admits it was mainly to annoy her brother who hated it. She may have been a schoolgirl Duran Duran fan, but Marillion were always her favourites. On leaving school she got a job with Saatchi & Saatchi in their marketing department and spent the next eight years climbing the ladder to success. Only trouble was, it wasn't what she wanted to do, so she took a lower-paid job at EMI in back catalogue.



Marillion's fan-turned-manager Lucy Jordache.

When she heard the idea of doing a double album called the *Best Of Both Worlds*, one from the Fish era and the other with the line-up that has been tight for the past decade and a half, she insisted on being involved. *Best Of*s usually see all the hits crammed onto a CD with a single-sheet fold-over sleeve containing a one-sided potted history. Lucy got onto Steve Hogarth and the guys about doing sleeve notes, saying that she'd got Fish to do them for the songs he'd written, whilst at the same time spinning Fish the same story. The upshot was a beautifully packaged, lovingly compiled and essential-to-the-fans best-of, featuring genuinely interesting song-by-song notes by the band. The upshot was that it sold way above expectations.

It also spurred on the remastering of all their original albums, which cleared their debt to EMI. Now we all know that major record companies have a tendency to do as little as possible to earn as much money as they can for themselves, particularly when it comes to reissues. But Lucy was determined that the Marillion catalogue would offer more than just running a dodgy copy of the master tapes through a compressor. She went on a pilgrimage to find demos, alternative mixes and writing tapes for bonus tracks. One of them was the title track for the album *Afraid Of Sunlight*. The version she dug up featured Steve Hogarth alone in the studio late one night actually composing the song on the piano, going over different bits again and again for about 20 minutes. She took the tape into Abbey Road and, with Peter Mew, spent six hours editing together a version that didn't actually exist, but was the birth of the song. It blew the band away so much they gave her a credit. She also was able to ensure that all the reissues were accompanied by beautifully compiled and illustrated 24-page sleeve-note booklets. This level of dedication did not go unnoticed by the band and they offered her a full-time job. Although it meant a massive drop in pay, not for the first time, she accepted and a new ear in the music industry was born.



Engineer and producer Dave Meegan has worked with the band since 1983.

✚ top Mix & Match

Part of Marillion's new deal for fans involves letting them get their hands dirty, by choosing set lists and even joining the band on stage. Taking this one step further, they're now inviting anyone to have a go at remixing a song from their most recent studio album, *Anoraknophobia*. For the modest fee of £10 or £20 for all nine, they will send you compiled tracks as WAV files, meaning stereo drums, individual guitar/keyboard/bass tracks, a stereo mix of the vocals with fairy dust sprinkled over, and dry versions of the individual vocal tracks for you to immerse in your own brand of reverb. As far as they're concerned, the more radical you get the better.

An album of the best remixes will be released and the lucky dozen or so remixers will receive £500 (and more importantly, the opportunity to have their own artistically pure, full-blown reworking heard by the world). Of course, if you're just a fan who has no interest in looping, cutting, splicing, and track mashing, but would simply like to play along with the band minus the guitar, bass, vocals, or you want to listen to just the bass on its own, all you have to do is line all the tracks up on your computer at the same start point, press Play, then mute or fade at your leisure.

✚ top

Making A Racket

Their offices are lovingly described as Kebab Van One and Kebab Van Two (which in truth are a pair of substantial Portacabins, one for boys, one for girls), and sit opposite the heart of Racket Records, the band's studio and their comprehensive merchandising warehouse. Situated on a trading estate in Buckinghamshire, the Marillion operation is a model of 21st century efficiency. Inside the unit is a fully functioning state-of-the-art studio which is decorated to the taste and comfort of the band. The hub of the system is a 32-input Pro Tools HD system, with Emagic's *Logic* as a front end, "as it's more musical and instant". Using an Apple G4, they are able to record all their rehearsals, jams, and live gigs in great detail. It gives them the flexibility to cut and paste any performance or section, either as a band or an individual solo or ad lib, and use it wherever they want.

After more than two decades suffering the injustice of record advances and the loss of ownership of their work, in perpetuity (that's one of those terms that lawyers use in order to buy a new Porsche every year, it means 'forever') Marillion came up with a revolutionary concept. They asked their fans to buy their next record in advance. For £16, a fan would receive a deluxe copy of the CD with an additional bonus CD, and their name printed in the sleeve notes. Tens of thousands agreed, paid up front and left Marillion in the enviable position of having a massive advance to record the album they wanted, with guaranteed sales and no A&R/promotions executives demanding a more Noel Gallagher sound on the guitar.



Marillion's second convention at Butlins in Minehead saw over 2000 fans from all over the world converge for a weekend of band-related fun.

The result, *Anoraknophobia*, was produced by Dave Meegan, whose relationship with the band goes back as far as 1983 when Meegan was the tape-op on Marillion's second album *Fugazi*, with Nick Tauber producing. Meegan didn't start his producing duties until eight years later, on the *Brave* album, although it's worth pointing out that between those times he had helped to engineer and mix U2's *The Joshua Tree*, been Trevor Horn's engineer and worked with the Pet Shop Boys.

Apart from his bionic ear for getting quality sounds committed to record, his job is sifting through thousands of hours of jams and writing sessions in order to focus the five individuals into a coherent direction. A

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Marillion album is not just a dozen pop songs, all sounding similar to the single. As Meegan describes it, "they make epic soundscapes which people can go back to for years and find something they haven't heard previously".

Their recording setup may not be a luxurious penthouse suite in the West Indies, but it's theirs, meaning they aren't paying 10 grand a week to sit by the pool drinking Pimm's. It's permanently set up for the band to work on material. A typical day starts at 1pm and ends around 6pm, then after dinner one of them will do overdubs until 10pm.

After the success of fans pre-ordering *Anoraknophobia*, which went onto sell 100,000 copies, mainly in high street shops, with a next-to-zero marketing budget, Marillion are proposing to do the same with their next album, only more so. This time it will go on sale at £30 in advance, for which the buyer gets a bonus album (which won't be available anywhere else, ever) totalling over two hours of new songs. It will also contribute to a highly creative marketing strategy, which will see Marillion come bursting out of their cult anonymity and into mainstream consciousness. They will also be promoting it by embarking on their biggest tour in years.

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Hi De Hi

And it's live where the band really show their class. Now, a weekend at Butlins in Minehead in the middle of March might not be everyone's dream break, but for 2500 fans from across the entire planet it was a pilgrimage not to be missed. From Friday to Sunday Marillion held the second of what looks like becoming an annual convention. They premiered new material, played their top 10 songs of all time as chosen by the fans, and did a band swap, where musically inclined fans replaced one of the band on stage to play a song to an audience of thousands. But the highlight of the convention was when the band set a world record for filming, manufacturing and selling a live concert DVD (recorded Friday night, on sale, fully packaged at Sunday lunchtime).

Apart from the band playing three full, but distinctive sets, there was a full supporting cast, including Cordisto, Kid Galahad, Martin Gretch, John Otway, Aziz Ibrahim, White Buffalo, Gazpacho and the odd all-star jam. Whereas most headline acts would charge a band a buy-on fee to support them in front of a capacity audience, everyone involved was paid and well looked after. During the day there were numerous Marillion quizzes, a football tournament, kids' painting competitions, a question and answer session where punters could ask the band whatever they liked, and mammoth signing sessions lasting around four hours a day. Five percent of the band's database — about one percent of their current record-buying audience — got a weekend to remember.



As well as undertaking guitar tech duties for the band, Colin Price manages their Racket Records label.

The way Marillion go about the business of making their music and the way they service their audience is totally unique. With virtually no radio play or media exposure of any kind, they have managed to sustain a huge fan base, sell hundreds of thousands of copies of every album they release and continue to attract fans who weren't born when they started out. As they approach their silver jubilee, they have more relevance in today's music industry than all the boy/girl bands laying end to end across the Atlantic Ocean (although that doesn't seem a bad idea). In these days where major labels have an increasing stranglehold on retail, whilst at the same time investing in short-term celebrity with no thought to musical integrity and longevity, Marillion are market leaders in Internet marketing and forward thinking. [SOS](#)

Published in SOS September 2003

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