



Q&A with Steve Hogarth

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Gazette: Was the one and only reason for doing this show the reaction you got at Marillion's Los Trios Marillos acoustic show in Montreal in 2005?

Steve Hogarth: Yes.

Gazette: Did you never get a reaction like that anywhere else before?

Hogarth: Not personally. The thing is, at that point I hadn't actually done any H Natural (solo) shows, and on that Los Trios tour that we did of America, at some point during that tour, I think it was (guitarist) Steve Rothery who had the bright idea of sending me out on my own first to do a song, and then adding Pete (Trewavas, bassist) into the equation, and then adding himself into the equation and carrying on with the three of us from there. And so as a consequence of that, for the first time in my entire career, I was walking out alone onto a stage. By the same token, for the first time in my career, whatever reaction I got walking onto that stage was for me, and it wasn't shared. And I had been so conscious for so many years of having, to some extent, at least, inherited the success I've had with Marillion. I often compare it to a horse that was already running, and we basically switched riders: Fish got off, I got on. But the thing was already running at speed at that point, and already had a lot of people who wanted to watch it run. So it was very difficult to assess for myself how much of the excitement in the audience was for me, or was there already. So for the first time ever, I was walking out and whatever happened was for me in that moment, because I was on my own. And so, each night walking out and being first was a chance for me to assess the level of affection the crowd had for me personally, rather than the band or part of the band. And nowhere was that reaction more incredible than in Montreal. So it was a double whammy, really: There was a room full of people who were incredibly passionate, incredibly affectionate ... as I'd come to expect, to be honest, in Montreal ... but on that occasion, it was all my own. And it really knocked me sideways because of that.

Gazette: I did want to talk about your relationship and the band's relationship with Montreal. I've seen so many shows where a band says such-and-such a city is their absolute favourite to play, but I really do get the feeling with you and the rest of the band that Montreal really is your favourite. Am I right about that?

Hogarth: We have a few hot spots, and by hot spots I mean places where there's a really great vibe for the band in the world. And rarer than hot spots are the places that are like soul spots: They're the places where, when we play there, there's almost a palpable spirituality in the air. Strangely enough, most of the others are in France. Paris is incredible; Montpellier on this last tour, I've never known anything like it. And Montreal. These are the places where we've been spoiled, and we've come to expect the most incredible atmosphere, and never been disappointed. And so certainly, on the North American continent, nothing really comes close to the vibration that we experience in Montreal. The Spectrum remains the only place on Earth where I've laid down on a crowd. I just would not naturally do that, for all sorts of reasons. First of all, I think it's all been done, so why do it? Second of all, there's always that fear that as you go down, the waves will part and you'll just hit the floor. (Laughs) It requires a lot of faith and trust for a singer in a band to lay down on a crowd, and I normally would never do it, but in that moment in the Spectrum it felt like exactly the right thing to do. And I've never done it before or since. So I can't put into words the feeling that I've come to know in Montreal, but at the risk of boring myself, and as I keep saying, I never knew whether that feeling was for me, or if it was something that had always been there. I remember when I joined the band, they always used to say to me, "Wait till we get to Montreal. Wait till we get to Montreal." So they already had the thing going on there, and so naturally I'd assumed that I had inherited it.

Gazette: I think you're selling yourself short a little bit, though: By the time I started going to your shows, around the time of *Afraid of Sunlight*, there was clearly a lot of admiration for you personally, in addition to the band, from the audience.

Hogarth: That's probably easier for you to experience, being amongst them, than it is for me to experience on the stage. Because it tends to come toward the stage like a wave, and so from the stage you experience the wave coming. You're not conscious of any focus of it, really. And also, you know, I've probably got some deep-seated stuff in my head about inheriting this thing. I don't know what people would have to do to me to get me past that. They'd have to carry me around, feed me grapes for a year before I'd finally convince myself of it. (Laughs)

Gazette: Even now, after all these years, you still aren't confident about it?

Hogarth: No, no! Even now.

Gazette: That makes me kind of sad, frankly: You're possibly the only person who's been at a Marillion show in the last however many years who thinks that way.

Hogarth: (Laughs) Well, the therapy's coming along just fine.

Gazette: So how did you feel the first time you did a show on your own? Were you a bundle of nerves?

Hogarth: Yeah. Well, the first time I did it, I did it in Girona down in Spain, at a record fair. The record fair itself was a surreal experience, because hardly anyone was there: It was just this warehouse thing, with the most appalling acoustics, and just a few people moving around a few stalls of records. There was barely anybody there. And I'd only accepted the gig because I thought it would be a really low-key way to start, to do one with hardly anyone looking, which I felt was what I needed. So it was very low-key, and to make things even more surreal, Hugh Cornwell ... the great Hugh Cornwell, from the Stranglers, was opening for me, with his band. That felt strange, too, because I really felt I should be opening for him in a fair and equal world. So the whole process of it was strange. And when I went on stage, there were no lights: There were only these huge, big lights which were there to light up the warehouse. So there was no atmosphere. About 30 people pulled up little chairs and shuffled on to them, and so it was very surreal ... almost too surreal to get nervous about. The first proper show was in Paris, at the Cafe de la Danse, which is about a 400-capacity theatre, maybe more. I think there were about 450 people. And that felt like a real gig, of course. There was the real hum of anticipation and excitement that's always there in Paris. And I did walk into that show with very little idea of what I was going to do when I got to the centre stage. Which was the whole point of the H Natural gigs: to turn up with a load of songs that I've kind of half-rehearsed and thought I could get away with playing, and just take it wherever it went. And to talk to the people, tell them about my life, ask about theirs, sing some songs. That was the idea behind it. And that's a great freedom, but also, during the early stages it was very scary, because I didn't actually know what I was going to do. And so there was a feeling of being something of a charlatan for taking people's money in the first place, because I'd got so used to walking on a stage knowing what's going to happen, almost to the last micron. Marillion rehearse for bloody months ... mainly because we're so slow and so useless (laughs), but we do rehearse for weeks and weeks. And I got used to that level of readiness for a show. And so to walk on a stage with barely any did feel almost like theft, in terms of having taken people's money. So it was a very charlatan-like and very nervous experience, the first show. But having got one or two behind me, the thing really opened up into a thing of great freedom and great excitement. Just the thrill of walking on, wondering what it would be like tonight. Not just wondering what the crowd would be like, but wondering what I would actually do and which songs I would play and where they would take me. And how long I would play, because I billed the show as one hour of chat and music, and I don't think at any show at all I did less than an hour and a half. At most, I did over two, and notably at the Cavern Club (in Liverpool) I did over three hours. Because I said we'll see where it takes us, and if the vibe's happening, we'll just carry on till either I get bored or you do.

Gazette: It sounds quite liberating, compared to a band that's so structured every night.

Hogarth: It's the difference between flying a microlight and piloting the space shuttle, in just about every way. The freedom to change your direction and go anywhere is almost total with this thing, and within Marillion I've kind of hustled them into making it freer. It's been a lot freer on this tour.

Gazette: I heard you were changing the set list every night now.

Hogarth: Yeah. That's kind of a natural progression of what I found out during the H Natural tour, was that if you do make it free, the audience responds in a much stronger way, because they feel involved. And you don't get bored, and so the thing stays fresh, and you never feel like you're going through the motions. And you stay outside of a comfort zone. I've learned it's important to do all of those things whenever possible. I think, as an artist, if you're comfortable doing what you're doing, you're probably going to bore an audience. And if you're not, well, you should be. (Laughs) There has to be an element of fear and uncertainty, because that's the point. Nobody wants to see a tightrope walker who's never going to fall off! (Laughs) Where's the thrill in that? You want to watch the guy wobble! (Laughs)

Gazette: It's that thing about all great art demanding tension, right? There's a thrill about tension and release, and you can't release without building up to something.

Hogarth: No, you can't. And to err, as they say, is human. Without error, there's nothing for your spirit to get off on. I think error is important. I think danger is important, too. I think all the great artists, they brood a little bit. And you think, well, what's he going to do? Is it safe? Personally, that excites me. All my favourite artists are the ones who I don't really quite know where they're going to take it. They're balancing on the head of that pin, and you don't know which direction they're going to fall off in. But you know they probably are going to fall off, and all my favourite artists fall off the head of a pin in good humour. They don't get pissed off when it happens. It makes them laugh. That's important, too: To defuse that kind of pompous thing is important. Especially with a band, and a band like Marillion, which is so musically complex and technologically and technically complex. It's almost a relief when something goes wrong, I think. They've often been the moments in the past that have saved us, where we've been having an okay show and then something's gone wrong and made the audience laugh, or something has happened from the audience which has made the band laugh. And then suddenly you have a completely different thing going on: You have an interplay, and you have humanity going on, instead of just five guys showing off.

Gazette: I remember one show where Mark (Kelly)'s keyboards melted down at the beginning of King, and you started riffing on your guitar and things just carried on until Mark got his stuff sorted out. That stands out in my mind: I can't recall anything else specific from that show, but I remember that.

Hogarth: Well, you can usually rely on Mark for something to crap out (laughs), and nothing's changed in that area, I'll tell you.

Gazette: It seems like Marillion has become better and better at walking that tightrope you were talking about and taking risks, over the last decade. I don't know whether you sense the same thing ...

Hogarth: Yes, we have been getting more and more out of the comfort zone, but it's taken a bit of pushing on my part. Partly out of sheer devilment, of course, but also partly out of the instinctive knowledge ... which is now actually based on experience ... that it's more exciting for a crowd if the band is on the edge. That happens in the H Natural shows, but it's not to do with pushing technology at all. There's no technology to push. It's me and a piano. I was tempted at the beginning: I thought, "Well, what if I got some kind of looping pedal, and I could set up a little loop and I could play along with that, and I could build the thing up and I could make textures. That might be quite interesting." And the more I thought about it, the more I thought, "Well, it would, but what if it was just about heart and soul, and almost the opposite of looping things up and creating textures? What if you played the absolute bare minimum all the time? And then there would just be a voice. There would just be your own spirit." And so I kind of abandoned that impulse to compensate for being a solo performer with lots of little gizmos and gadgets, and foot pedals, and a loop, and maybe I could have a drum machine for some of the things so it would add a nice steady rhythm. And in the end, I came back to thinking, "Well, this shouldn't be about that." As soon as you start adding those things, you start chipping away at the spontaneity and the in-

the-momentness and the freedom for it to go anywhere. You know, the 60 songs out of which you might choose 25 for your set list, suddenly you go, "Oh, well, I can't do that one, because that needs Pedal No. 4 and this, that and the other." I just didn't want to end up having to rely on any technology. And I started out doing Cloudbusting by Kate Bush with a little string machine, because it was all about the strings when she did it, and I even abandoned that, in favour of piano in the end. It's good to be able to show up with a grand piano, nothing else: nothing to plug in, nothing to switch on, except the lights. Maybe not even lights: I've done some of the shows just with candles. So the only electric thing was the PA that I was coming through. I don't think I could really get away without a PA.

Gazette: Is there any material that you think is off-limits? Would you ever do This Strange Engine or The Invisible Man solo?

Hogarth: (Laughs) Well, I haven't yet. There's usually a wag in the audience who shouts out for something like that. I think if I was to do This Strange Engine, it would suffer. (Pauses) Maybe it wouldn't. Maybe the people would enjoy it, because the sections of music do change from moment to moment. But there are things, really, that need that kind of gradual ramp up to the extreme power that happens at the end of This Strange Engine. The same with The Invisible Man: That's a song where the tension in it is building and building until I'm screaming my head off at the end. I don't know if that would work with the piano. Leave it with me. (Laughs) It feels like a defeat if I say I wouldn't do it, doesn't it? So I'm reluctant to say that I can't do it in an interview.

Gazette: Are there any particular songs that you find work best at the solo shows, that you've been playing every night?

Hogarth: Let me think. (Pauses) You're Gone, actually, is divine as piano and voice. That was a big surprise. It's lovely, stripped-down like that. Famous Blue Raincoat became a song that I hardly ever left out. The set list was changing from night to night a lot, but there were certain staples that I felt it would be a shame to leave out.

Gazette: Especially in Montreal: You can't leave a Leonard Cohen song out here.

Hogarth: It's such an amazing, amazing song. It's not like I've got any take on it, really: I'm just singing it. Any character it might acquire beyond that of the song itself is coming from my spirituality rather than something radical that I've done to it. I'm just singing the song. But it's such an incredible song, you almost can't sing it often enough. The first time I heard it, I had to sit down. It's one of those songs I can remember where I was the first time I heard it. I can't say that about very many songs, that they're so important to you that you know where you were when you heard them.

Gazette: Are those the songs that you've been covering? I've been looking at the set lists, and you're covering a pretty wide range of material, going from Carole King to X-Ray Spex.

Hogarth: Yeah, I'm just singing anything that turned me on at any point in my life for whatever reason. I've been doing Germ Free Adolescents because I just think it's such a great, goofy little song. I love songs that somebody's written and they're about something that you couldn't imagine someone writing a song about. Like someone who's pathological about their own personal hygiene. That's such a great thing to write a song about. Wichita Lineman I've done as well, because it was my dad's favourite song. Again, you know, who would write a song about a man who fixes overhead cables? Do you know what I mean? On paper, it's ludicrous! And then you hear the song, and it's so incredibly beautiful. Those are the things that inspire me most of all: that combination between the unlikely and the almost painfully beautiful.

Gazette: How about your early-career songs that you've been singing? How is it different for you singing a Europeans or How We Live song now as opposed to 20-some years ago?

Hogarth: I guess I'm someone else now, really, to the point where I don't really remember who I was back then. It's very hard to compare. I'm very conscious of who I am and how I am now, but it's such a long time since back then, and I guess I'm such a cabbage that I actually can't remember. I've lived so many lives, almost, since then that the person I was back then, I would barely know him if he walked in the room now. I don't know what I'd make of him. I'd probably have a big argument with him. (Laughs)

Gazette: By doing these shows on your own, are you learning anything new about the person you are now?

Hogarth: Well, I'm learning that I can sing in tune. I've been mixing these shows as well. I haven't just been doing them: They've been recorded. And Stephanie Ringuet in Paris set up this site for me called H-Tunes, where you can go and download the shows. But I'm the one who's been mixing them.

It involves me listening very, very carefully, and analyzing what I've done. And I've certainly learned that I sing more in tune than I thought I did. I've always felt, well, I'm not a bad singer if I could just stay in tune. (Laughs) And then I've listened to these shows, and I've realized that maybe the reason I couldn't stay in tune was the band I was trying to sing over was so bloody loud, I could barely hear myself half the time. When I can hear myself, as I can in these situations, I'm singing in tune. So I've learned that. And I've also been amazed to discover that I can hold a crowd! That I can actually hold a crowd's interest for two hours, with more than just my singing. Just by talking. There have been certain shows where I've actually wondered if I could cut it as a stand-up comedian, which has been a complete surprise, because if you'd have asked me, I'd have said that's the last thing on Earth I could ever be. So just to have a rapport going with an audience ... But it's not like I'm walking out in front of a bunch of people who don't know me and are all going, "Well, who the hell's this, then?" I think it's so much easier to have a rapport with a crowd who have a lot of affection for you before you even open your mouth. I mean, you can't really go wrong.

Gazette: It's also, I think, a bit of a different crowd for you. Not everybody who goes to a Marillion show would go to a solo show. People who go see Marillion and have a few beers and party to the up-tempo songs might not be tempted to go to a sit-down, piano-and-voice concert.

Hogarth: No. And I wouldn't want them there, necessarily.

Gazette: Exactly. You weed out the undesirables right away.

Hogarth: (Laughs) I weed out the hooligans, yes. I don't always use the word "hooligans" as a derogatory comment. There's a lot to be said for hooliganism. But yeah, in that situation, you're better off without them in the room.

Gazette: I'm kind of afraid to ask, but is there any idea when Marillion will be touring North America again as a full band? Are there any tentative plans?

Hogarth: No, nothing immediate. I mean, who knows? But at the moment, the general feeling within the organization is, well, what would we achieve? That's the problem we've got. I mean, we'd make a load of North Americans happy, but in terms of the time it takes to go and tour America, we can achieve so much more here in Europe. So that's the problem. But that isn't to say we won't come back. The problem we have is that since 9/11, just getting there is so much more of a pain in the ass. Just being allowed to go. And then you think, "Well, hang on a minute. Who's doing who the favour here? Why should I feel like this continent is reluctantly doing me this huge favour by letting me walk its shores?" Last time we played in America, we had to all go and queue outside the American embassy to get visas. You can't actually get visas without going and being interviewed. And they give everyone the same interview time. They tell you to come at 7:45 a.m. So you've got to go, and when you get there, you find there's a one-kilometre queue down the street, because they've given everyone the same appointment time. Because what they're really doing is making you queue up to get into the building, and go through security, and do all that, and then they ask you all these questions. And at some point during that process, you say to yourself, "Just how much do I want to go and play these little clubs?" And the Canadian government's not much easier, to be honest. You get the old third degree at the Canadian border as well. So it's such a struggle to get the visas and do all that. And then you go there, and then you lose money, and then nobody plays your record on the radio, and then you come home. And then you realize it's taken you two months where you could have been somewhere else where they do play your record on the radio and where you don't actually lose money, but you make money, and all of that. That's the long answer. But the short answer is that there's no plans to come back to North America in the near future. But hey, we'll never say never. I mean, we've been there once thanks to a tour fund. If we could find some innovative way to finance the whole thing, and for there to be a point to it, rather than just making a few American fans happy. Although, it might be cheaper to put you guys on a few jumbo jets and fly you to the U.K. I'm not joking: It might actually be cheaper for the band to send you all tickets and fly you to London.