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Music Interview - Steve Hogarth / Marillion

A Whisper In Your Ear...

Mention the name Marillion and music fans will either know they are the best kept secret in the music industry or ask whether the band split up years ago. The truth is that since the 1990's, Marillion has proven to be one of the most independent and innovative groups to challenge the assumption that success is measured by the size of the record contract that you sign.

The band has been at the cutting edge of new technology for a number of years now and has developed and nurtured a massive underground following on the back of Internet Marketing directly to their fan base. Unique in asking fans to pre-purchase each new release, Marillion has taken the trust afforded them by some 13,000 loyal supporters, who spent their money and signed up the last time out Marillion experience all this love and trust from their fans without having to compromise their musical ideals in any form.

They have taken self-management of their own success to a whole new level. When it comes to forward thinking, Marillion are on the cusp of turning cult anonymity back into mainstream acceptance.

Currently Marillion are enjoying some serious media attention on the back of a Top 5 single in the British Charts and the release of their wonderful record 'Marbles' in 2005.

Dare I mention music that moves people and supplies a real dramatic power to elevate the listener beyond the normal listening experience? Think of epic soundscapes which people can go back to for years and find something new.

The Event Guide recently caught up with Steve Hogarth, lead singer and lyricist with Marillion on the announcement of his first solo performance in Dublin.

Congratulations on the success of the 'Marbles' release, Steve. Has it been the success you expected prior to initial release?

I guess so... From my perspective it is hard to know. Album sales are strong and concert ticket sales are also up. Reaction from the critics and the fans has been very positive and sales are better than the last album, 'Anaroknaphobia'; not 10 times as much, but enough to give us a good feeling. We did a pre-Christmas tour in 2005 as a bit of a 'jolly' in selected venues and expected ticket sales to be slow as we were touring the same Marbles material, but sales were up everywhere.

Again you went back to the fan base to raise funds. Only this time around you used the monies to promote the album rather than record the songs. How did that work out?

We spent a lot more money than a major record company would have spent. It has given us a chance to work to our own agenda rather than having to work to the dictates of a major record label, which is what so many artists end up doing. Rather than fighting against someone else's agenda and looking for attention, we had control over where the money was spent and whether we felt it was a good idea.

It is ironic that a Top 5 single brought the commercial recognition that you sought. Marillion have never been considered a singles band.

We were Top 5 in England and that was very gratifying. I remember doing an interview on BBC radio that asked if we had distorted the charts by mobilizing our fan-base to buy the new single. How absurd was that when you consider who else, apart from your fans, would you expect to buy your single in the first place?

You also got to tour the U.S.A. again... How was that experience?

The situation in touring the U.S.A. is that there are a few hot spots that are great in terms of support, but the country is so vast... We toured selected cities like New York, Chicago and Philadelphia where we are recognised and the fans reaction was great. You need to keep within the areas where you are known and to develop the fan-base there. Once you get south of a certain line, there is no point of developing further. It can be a big drain on your resources and time.

Can I ask you about the influence that Dave Meegan, your producer, has on the band? If Marillion is a true democracy over the longevity of your recording career as a band, is Dave cast in the role of Benevolent Dictator to a degree?

Dave is from Dublin and is a key influence on the final decisions that Marillion make in the recording process. He can be a bit of a dictator but that is the role of a producer. It is important to the band to have a final yes or no on creative ideas. He is a visionary man and a very spiritual person and somebody whose judgement I can trust. I see myself as a very spiritual person and my words are all about spirit. I can relate to him as a friend and we talk about love, life, politics, the world, the universe and everything. It is important to have a perspective outside the band as to what works and what is unnecessary and Dave provides that.

You seem to have a strong Irish connection, given your beautiful song 'Easter', your Irish producer and Dublin born keyboard player Mark Kelly? Is it the sense of spirit you get from our people coupled with the streak of rebellion that seems to run through our Psyche?

I can empathise totally with that. That would almost define me as well. I tend to kick against the system. I feel very strongly that sense of rebellion in myself and am very aware of all the injustice in the world. It really makes me angry when I see people that don't seem to care as long as they are all right. They put their head in the sand and don't care about people being done down as long as they are comfortable. I have never been like that and have always been keenly aware and in that sense I am very political. That is what comes through in what I write at times.

Music can be seen as the great healer. Your music & words have a profound effect on people emotionally and I wonder if showing so much of yourself is hard to do?

I am not a songwriter in the classic craft sense. I cannot just sit down and knock out a tune that will sell like some of the session writers that work in the large publishers. I am a songwriter in the sense of writing things that need to be said. Expressing my deepest feelings is easy in song but going out to expose the songs to the world can sometimes be exhausting. It can be worse than a sense of prostitution in that a prostitute says you can take my body but you cannot have my mind. With the songs, my deepest feelings are out there on sale and that can be very draining. On a day to day basis it does not bother you so much, but every now and again you feel the need to have a sit down and weep!!

I am sure that it is a humbling experience to witness the level of dedication and fervour of the fans, but can this also lead to feelings of a sense of foreboding?

No I don't feel foreboding. We have gotten to a place where we are not under any pressure to deliver the same stuff. The fans will take the time to listen to whatever we give them and we try not to make the same record twice. There is a freedom to be honest and say that this is where we

are at the moment.

The reviews of the solo shows have been fantastic! You are playing songs from way back in your career and I wonder how much reworking & rearranging needs to be done?

The whole idea behind going out on a solo tour was to strip everything down to the very soul. I wanted to get into the essence of the songs and to just have a bare arrangement and voice. That is why I am playing a single keyboard. It could have been a chance for me to show off what an accomplished musician I am but that is not what this is about. I am taking my diary with me and reading from it between songs, chatting and answering questions from the audience as well as playing requests. The songs cover all parts of my career from the Europeans, How We Live, the H Band and Marillion. There is no set list and I have also been doing covers of songs that mean something to me. It has been very rewarding and it is a process of getting to know me a little deeper through the shows.

You have been playing quite a long set and is it a feeling of freedom to sit alone in such intimate venues and connect with the audience?

It is going beyond the normal experience with Marillion. If you liken the band and all the tons of equipment we bring on the road to a massive elephant, then I like to think that I am getting down off the elephant and whispering into your ear...!! Every songwriter develops into something of a philosopher over time, even if not all that intelligent, and the songs connect with the part of you that needs to communicate a feeling. The experience has been quite moving. I want the atmosphere to dictate what happens. Let's see where it takes us.

Steve Hogarth plays Whelan's, on Dublin's Wexford Street, on Saturday 29th April. 8pm. €20, available from Ticketmaster, WAV, Road Records, City Discs and Sound Cellar.