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## MARILLION 'Marbles' (Intact 12772) (2004)

You have to hand it to Marillion. Ever since the departure of Fish and those halcyon days of big record contracts and hit singles they have been trying to claw back lost ground and big label - and critics' - apathy. The arrival of Steve Hogarth was seen as dubious by many of the faithful although H won the fanbase over in the end, and was not averse to echoing some of his predecessor's stage theatricals.



The band moved through the nineties purveying solid but ever less commercial material. Starting the decade with 'Holidays In Eden', a masterpiece of songwriting and containing some of their finest "pop" tunes, they followed it with the full-blown progressive rock concept album 'Brave' before the inevitable exit from EMI. Several albums later they were ready to put a collective ten fingers up to the world and peddle their own way via healthy Internet sales.

Like its predecessor, 'Anoraknophobia', 'Marbles' has sold an estimated 13,000 copies through a carefully orchestrated publicity campaign where fans can literally pay for a piece of the action, and the band get to finance their own publicity. This appears to be working well for the release of the album's first single.



Fans will have been following the progress of the album for the past year or so via the band website and newsletter, and it is a remarkable story that could show the way for other bands who seek a degree of independence or have just run their course with corporate life. Indeed, Chris Rea is another immediate example of a big-name artist who seeks a greater deal of creative control via his own label and, freed of his strictures with Sony, George Michael will do the same in the future.

So have Marillion finally lost their "marbles" or have they put the balls back firmly in their own court? If "Anoraknophobia" was almost a return to commercial values, the new opus is more aligned with 'Afraid Of Sunlight'. Trusted producer and engineer Dave Meegan has concocted a very dense soundscape, (his importance as the sixth band member is evidenced in the photo shoot). Hogarth's vocals are dreamy and dramatic, Trewavas' bass is pushed forward in the mix, whilst Rothery thankfully seems to have left the battery out of his chorus pedal. The whole album reflects several years of hard grafting from the band and their painstaking craftsmanship in the studio has more than paid off.

Marillion seem desperate to become fashionable again, and 'Marbles' is the album to put them back in front of a more appreciative audience. They have all the vibrancy and immediacy of a Coldplay or a Starsailor, I am sure that the band members don't work in a vacuum but could it just be that like all great prog-rock bands they blaze the trail and others may simply need to catch up from time to time? The album switches from long prog workouts like the opening track 'The Invisible Man' where there are echoes of Floyd amongst others and the magnificent 'Ocean Cloud', to the more accessible, plaintive and powerful tunes that Hogarth does so well. So if you like this aspect of the band, 'Genie', 'Fantastic Place', and 'The Only Unforgivable Thing' (on disc 1) will more than suffice.

Disc 2 rings the changes slightly with the more pithy (for Marillion anyway) and together with the first single 'You're Gone' tracks like 'Don't Hurt Yourself' and 'Angelina' are radio-friendly ('Angelina' in particular will find greater currency with those night-time jocks), which will be another key to the band's wider acceptance in the new millennium.

'Marbles' could have been overblown, self-indulgent, and slightly irrelevant. What emerges (and, rather splendidly indeed, from the sumptuous 'Campaign Edition' box if your funds can stretch to it) is easily one of their strongest offerings and may just put them back where they belong, in front of a wider, more receptive audience.

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Review by David Randall