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Marillion: The music business is over



Marillion hope to swap their trousers and coats for shorts and sunglasses in Norwich. Credit: Carl Glover.

Marillion have packed their bags and instruments for their first European tour in three years. The group are coming to Norwich on 29 June 2004 - and we caught up with them for a chat.

Marillion are celebrating 22 years in the music biz with a 41-date tour - with the British leg kicking off in Norwich on 29 June.

Although you might expect them to feel jaded, they've been fired up by their first top ten hit in several years. You're Gone was the first single to be released from their latest album, Marbles.

Marillion notched up huge hits with Kayleigh and Lavender in the 1980s, but Scottish front man Fish left in 1988 to go solo.

He was replaced by Steve Hogarth and the band continued to be as prolific, but their music stopped making as much impact on the charts and the radio.

They were dropped by their record company EMI, but towards the end of the 1990s they found their fans were prepared to be their backers.

After an e-mail whip round paid for their American tour, the band started a website and persuaded their followers to stump up for recordings in advance.

Singer Steve Hogarth told Zoe Applegate how there's a new excitement in the band and why the music industry is dying but musicians will become richer than they have ever been.

What's it like to be back on a major world tour?

It's fantastic. It's been a couple of years - probably three years - since the last tour and I do miss it.

So much so that when Marillion are busy in the studio, if they don't need me, I normally run off and do little tours with my own little band, The H Band, because I miss it so much.

It keeps you in good practise.

Well, it's what I am. I think most people who get into bands - I mean proper bands, not all this drama school rubbish - want to perform. If that's what you are then that's what you've got to do.

One of the most striking things about Marillion is the way you've nurtured your relationship with your fans.



Steve Hogarth on stage. Credit: Ronald den Dekker.

It's something that's come from the fans really. For whatever reason our music elicits a deep-seated reaction from the people who get it.

People either get what we do or don't because what we do doesn't work terribly well on a superficial 'let's listen to it why we're doing the ironing way.'

It's music you have to listen to and if you make the effort with it then it hits you a lot deeper than a lot of pop or rock 'n' roll.

So the people who get it really get it and become submerged in it and very fanatical.

It's elicited this very loyal following globally and we found the fans hustle us and say can we help, can we contribute in some way.

Also as a band we've been around so long that there were people who were 18, 19 when they first started listening to the band.

Now they're running companies - I even get e-mails from the occasional government minister who says. 'I'm a really big fan.'

We had somebody from the British council in Rome e-mail us yesterday because he wants to come to the show.

We're in this situation where certain number of our fans are able to help us in all sorts of ways.

Fans who aren't government ministers or whatever are just as keen to put stickers up around the town or hand out flyers.

We've gradually built up this relationship where it's like a church.

One of the tools you've used to build that following is the internet and you've embraced its potential perhaps more than any other band. Why did you do that?

We were one of the first bands to have a web site. The reason for that came from the American fans.

We told the American fans in 1997 that we weren't able to go to the States because we couldn't afford it.

Normally, when we play in America we only do little club tours and we lose £30-40,000. At that point we couldn't justify throwing that amount of money in.

We told the American fan club that we wouldn't be touring the States and some guy put a note up on an internet forum saying 'I want Marillion to come here and I'd rather see them in my home country than have to get a plane.'

This guy said, 'I'm going to open a bank account and if there's anyone else out there in the States who wants to contribute I'm going to raise some money.'

They raised \$60,000 and gave it to us and said come and play! We went and toured in America and the money covered all the costs.

Firstly, that made us wake up to how important the internet was going to be and secondly it woke us up to the fact that our fans would do anything for us.

While we on tour we found a college kid, Erik Nielsen, who knew how to program websites. We stole him, moved him to England and he works with us to this day. He programs the website every day, so it's totally up-to-date.

We began collecting data on our fans. Back then we only had 5-6,000 e-mail addresses which was the total membership of our fan club.

At the moment we're just over 50,000. So we can send an e-mail to 50,000 fans and let them know what we're doing.

The internet has made us free and to a great extent it's been responsible for us not needing a record label any more.

You've revolutionised the way in which bands can work and you do everything in-house. Do you think Marillion pose a threat to the record industry majors?

I think new technology poses a threat to them. I think the music business is probably over and it will cease to exist in the next five to ten years. Music is probably going to become free.

Once everybody has got broadband connections - and in the developed world that will happen in the next five years or so - then it's going to be perfectly simple for you to e-mail your best friend and attach an album.

I know there's a lot of fuss going on about peer-to-peer and people sharing music and how terrible it is and it's illegal and let's prosecute.

But I don't think they'll be able to make it stick in the long-term and I don't think they'll be able to encode music sufficiently well to stop it being shared.

The consequence is music will become free and quite a long time before that the major labels will fall over and go broke. I think that would be a really good thing for music.

Marillion's Steve Hogarth told Zoe Applegate on the eve of the band's British tour leg how they might have split up if it wasn't for the internet.

Do you think younger artists who need a stash of money to develop their sound and for promotion will lose out? Your name is well-established and you've been able to trade on that.

No, I disagree. The reason our name is well-established is we did what proper bands do.

Marillion toured around and played all the little clubs and got changed in the gents' toilets which bands have always had to do for the first five, six, seven even ten years they're together.

In the old days you used to do that to develop yourself as an artist, try and build up a following and get a buzz going with your fingers crossed that one day you'd get a record deal.

All that will happen in the future is bands will spend the same amount of time playing around, living on fresh air.

Every time you play a show you'll say, 'If anyone here likes what we do leave us your e-mail address... we'll use it to keep you abreast of what we're doing.'

If the band is doing something sufficiently unique or interesting that people are genuinely excited, then they'll subscribe.

Anyone who's doing something interesting will end up with a core fanbase of 5-10,000 people, who are happy to send them £5 so they can make a record.

If they're any good the fact that their music is free means it will spread like wildfire. All there will be is word-of-mouth. The kind of market-led artists - the boys bands, the Britney Spears - will cease to exist because there'll be no money in it. Artists will have to justify themselves to the public to exist.

If there are sufficient people who are turned on by what they do, then artists will make more money than they've ever done before.

We're going to be richer than we've ever been once the music business stops existing.

I spoke to a fan who said liking Marillion involved more than just appreciating your music - it involved belonging to a community. How important has that community-feel been to your band?

I don't know.

What is true that the last album we made - we could have made a successful album by signing to an independent label - they would have given us an advance and money to record. Then they would have put it out in the shops.

It would have been successful just the same, but we wouldn't have earned that much money out of it.

The whole point of the music business is that it gets all the money and pays the artist almost nothing.

You can say, 'Well, how come Sting's a millionaire?' But for every £1m Sting's ever earned someone else has had £50m.

It's a hard question to answer, but the truth is we've been able to lose the need to sign a record deal by turning around to our fans and saying, 'Hey, why don't you buy our next album now before we've recorded it.'

It's the fact the fans believe in what we do and they trust us with their money that's enabled us to move forward and have a top 10 hit in 20 years or something.



The cover of Marillion's new album, Marbles.

What did you do when you heard the first single from Marbles had got to number seven?

I laughed for 10 minutes. I thought it was incredibly funny! Nothing's changed - we've been making really good music, as far as I'm concerned, since I joined the band in 1989.

Do you think Marillion would still be going without the internet?

Possibly not because I think we might have split up out of frustration. We would have felt that we weren't getting anywhere with the way it used to be.

We used to have a manager and he used to go and see the labels and come back and say, 'Well, this guy said this and this guy said that.'

At some point we probably would have gone, 'To hell with it.'

It's really hard to answer that question but what is definitely the case is without the internet we would not be in the position we are in now.

We wouldn't have just been in the top 10, we wouldn't have this really exciting feeling which is in the band at the moment.

The band is really vibed up in a way that normally you'd expect that with a band on their first two or three albums.

The shows - we've been touring in Scandinavia and Europe for the last five weeks - and the response at the shows has been incredible. People have been bouncing off the walls.

Last time you came to Norwich was in 1997. Are you looking forward to coming back?

Very much so. We've played the university a couple of times.

There's a really nice museum there, the Sainsbury Museum [Centre]. I usually have a wander round there during the day - there's a lot of art and sculpture in there.

It's great to be on tour during the summer as well. You can do it in your shorts and sunglasses which makes it more fun.

Norwich is the first date of the British leg - so how excited are you to be playing to a home crowd?

Normally we've done the UK first and with this tour we're doing the UK towards the end which means we'll be arriving in the UK with the whole show very tight.

I think we're going to be able to do a proper job on the UK audience. I'm looking forward to getting in front of them.