

http://www.theregister.co.uk/2004/04/28/marillion_comeback/

Marillion: appetite for resurrection

Old timers take fight to music biz

By Jon Collins, 28th April 2004

Venerable British rock outfit [Marillion](#) this week made it into the UK Top Ten for the first time in more than 17 years.

But while this is sweet, sweet music to the ears of the band's loyal fan base, the major music companies - EMI, Sony, Bertelsmann, AOL-Time Warner and Vivendi - will hear nothing but the ringing of alarm bells. Marillion, in common with other recent chart-toppers John Otway and The Alarm, have no place in the music industry's strategic plans.

So how *did* did Marillion hit number seven? Ironically, by employing the same tactics as the majors, with a little help from their friends. First, they invited hard-core fans to buy their next album a year in advance. Despite selling at what was an inflated price by anyone's standards, the band shifted 13,000 copies. This gave Marillion a marketing war chest which it has used to pay for advertising and PR for the new single, plus promoters and pluggers to ensure maximum airplay. In fact: just like a real record company.

It's pretty well impossible to fix the charts these days, but it is recognised that money buys chart success. A carefully-placed video on the right channel; subscription to radio services which just happen to result in airtime; exchange of discounted CDs for window space at a retail chain; all of these techniques are accepted parts of the music biz marketing culture.

Simon Napier-Bell, industry veteran and author of "Black Vinyl, White Powder", further points to the seemingly obvious: that getting into the charts is also a great way to sell records. The big labels' line of attack has evolved to ensure that maximum chart penetration for the latest sounds delivers the best return on investment.

The impact of the Internet on this seemingly perfect business model has been well documented. Although the long-term implications are inconclusive, the majors cannot afford to wait and see. The bulk of downloads are by teenagers, so companies looking to to shift "hard copy" have turned their attention to the "grey pound" - older generations who would rather buy than rip.

But while grandad is slipping a CD into the player and lighting his pipe, those bands who are old enough to be his, er, contemporaries, continue to take the fight to the industry giants. Key to this are the fans, thinks Marillion front man Steve Hogarth. "If you can enable a dialogue with your fans, you're in a position to move mountains," he notes, adding that Marillion aren't alone in nurturing this new kind of relationship. Indeed, there are plenty of other bands that have been "enabling dialogues" of their own, from old timers The Stranglers to bands with a younger appeal, such as Thrice. Steve's advice to new bands is pretty straightforward: "Instead of gigging round toilets for ten years trying to get a record deal, gig around toilets for ten years and ask people for their email addresses. If what you're doing strikes a chord, you'll be financially better off while remaining pure and free to do what you want."

So, what does this mean for the music industry? Steve sees the writing on the wall: "History will see it as a funny little anomaly that happened between 1950 and 2010," he says. "While technology made it possible, advances in technology will also make it impossible." He might have a point: while pressure has been put on file-sharing technologies such as Napster and Kazaa, it is difficult to see what protections can exist against the biggest file sharer of them all - email. "As soon as we can send an email and attach an entire album, music will become free," says Steve.

The music industry cannot afford to make significant changes to its marketing strategy without damaging its current business. Musicians, on the other hand, are free to test new ideas on the market - and sometimes they can beat the corporations at their own game. For Marillion, the chart position of number seven has been fanfared with headlines shouting "comeback", and if that's what the media has decided, then that's what the market perceives.

Meanwhile, the band can continue to release the music they want as author, producer, publisher and retailer - pocketing all off the cash rather than a paltry 5 per cent royalty hand-out. As the Marillion song says: "We get what we deserve." ®