

10 April, 2004

Out-floyding the Floyd: review of Marillion 'Marbles' artwork

The latest Marillion album, 'Marbles' has just come through my letterbox. Wahey!

It'll take me a while to assimilate and review the music, and I'm sure several other people will be offering reviews too, so I'll start with a different aspect: the artwork and packaging design. [Update: the music review is [here](#).]

In case people didn't know, 'Marbles' is to be made available in three formats. I have the deluxe campaign edition: two CDs in special packaging. Racket Records (i.e. Marillion themselves) will also be selling the 2CD album in a standard jewel case. These versions can be pre-ordered now, for despatch on the release date of 3 May. If you'd ordered the campaign edition last year, you'd have received it now, a month ahead of the official release. These editions are exclusively available from the Marillion.com website and live concerts - *not* standard retail outlets which would want a slice of Marillion's profits. There will be a retail version too, but it'll only be a 1CD subset of the double album, and will be released on 31 May - do you really want to wait an extra month for a lesser version? Buy the full album now, from the band!

My very first thought on opening the padded envelope: it's huge. Whereas a normal jewel case is 142 x 124 x 10mm, the deluxe campaign edition of 'Marbles' is 161 x 157 x 19mm - 13% wider, 27% taller and 90% thicker than a standard CD case.

The outer few millimetres are accounted for by a thick card slipcase, covering a 128-page (128 pages!) hardback book, the two CDs set into the covers. In addition to the usual credits pages, the book includes the song lyrics accompanied by a *lot* of original artwork. Thirty-two pages are filled by a list of names, from Eivind Aabakken to Zenon Zygmunt via me ;) These are the people who supported the recording and promotion of the album by pre-ordering it over seven months before its release. Personally, I feel our faith in the band has been repaid by the quality of the packaging alone, before even beginning to play the accompanying CDs.

There's an obvious comparison to the format and lavish production of Pink Floyd album packaging, especially 'Pulse' and 'Is There Anybody Out There?', but the comparison goes much further: the graphics, as always by Carl Glover for Aleph, seem to draw heavily on the Hipgnosis signature style of Pink Floyd artwork.

Let me clarify that before going on. A comparison can be made, and I comment on points where I see similarities; whether that was the designer's conscious intention is an entirely different matter. I've always thought there is a similarity between the clean visual style and general 'feel' of Carl Glover's work and that of Hipgnosis, but I don't mean to imply that one has *imitated* the other.

Despite the pithy title, I urge the reader to avoid getting distracted by the Floyd references - they're only peripheral details. I think they're worth mentioning, but they're not the focus of the review.

The slipcase front cover shows a boy holding marbles in front of his eyes, the 'flame' of colour inside mimicking the shape of his eyes. The blue & green of the marbles is somewhat matched by a blue/green filter applied to the entire image, adding a grey-green tint to his hair and the shadows in his skin.

The image has been generated artificially, by mirroring half the photo along the midline of his face, creating perfect, subtly unsettling bilateral symmetry. One minor criticism (a matter of taste, really) from someone who has used this effect very frequently: the mirroring extends to freckles and the fall of his hair. Personally, I find a better result is produced by not mirroring such irregularities, instead cloning the natural positions from the source photo and hence creating a more realistic illusion of a person with flawless facial symmetry *under* the skin. That said, the vaguely Rorschach or fractal pattern generated in his hair is pleasing and reminiscent of the 'Piston Broke' cover. The back cover reproduces the same effect using a source photo of a girl. A centre parting reduces the apparent artificiality of the symmetry, though freckles again make it more obvious than I'd choose. However, the marble 'eyes' are very powerful. The marbles in this image seem smaller than those held by the boy, covering only the girl's irises & pupils. Hence, the 'flame' inside each marble resembles the vertical pupil of a cat's eye framed within the outline of her natural eyelids. With perfect symmetry and very odd eyes, the sweet little girl staring intently at the viewer is only nominally human.

There's no text whatsoever on the slipcase, but the matt surface is broken in the centre of the front and back covers by a gloss rendering of the stylised 'Marbles' logo.

The front cover of the book itself is the left side of the boy's face (*his* left), the spine is the bridge of his nose, and the back cover is the right side of the *girl's* face - I didn't notice that for a while!

I'm not going to comment on every single image, (but probably most of them), and in sufficient detail to require that I do so in a couple of sittings and in a couple of postings. Here's the first.

The image on pages 10-11 is a good example of partial symmetry: a photo of a mowed field scattered with grass bales wrapped in black plastic (much like the scatter of marbles mid-game), with a giant black marble at the centre. The image is mirrored along this midline, but p.10 isn't quite a mirror image of p.11. The two nearest bales aren't mirrored, an electricity pole only appears on p.10, and the grassed foreground is different on each page. But for the direction of the light falling on two bales, this could give the illusion of a real field with carefully-arranged bales, rather than a post-processing effect.

There's a strong 'Pink Floyd' feel to the image - the '*Atom Heart Mother*' cow must have wandered just out of shot. [See what I mean about the Floyd references? I think there's a *feel* of the AHM cover about this image, but I'm not suggesting there has necessarily been an attempt to *reproduce* it.]

Pages 12-13 show the plastic and foil packaging of throat pastilles, all already removed except for one, itself a marble. Nice concept.

The spread on pages 24-25, showing a huge bulk goods train apparently passing down the middle of a road, with a white human silhouette superimposed in the middle of the image, screams '*Wish You Were Here*' - the colouring and imagery strongly matches that of the Pink Floyd album cover and booklet photography.

I can't work out whether the train really is in the street, or it's a stunning photo composite - it certainly looks genuine, just unlikely!

A 'no parking' sign in the foreground has been altered to show the '*Marbles*' logo. I'm unsure whether this adds anything to the overall result; its use on the following spread (p.26-7) as a corporate logo or graffito on a pristine white wall, is more effective.

These two double-page spreads and a third on p.28-9 collectively accompany the lyrics to '*Genie*'. Though superficially dissimilar, there is continuity between the first 'crowded' street scene, more open second street scene under a deep blue sky, and the less urban view of a isolated house under an identical sky.

Pages 30-31, an array of marbles in varying focus against a pink-purple background, could have been taken directly from the booklet of Pink Floyd's '*Meddle*'.

The image on p.32-33 has the distinctive feel of earlier Carl Glover artwork for Marillion, but I can't clearly explain why. Perhaps it's the use of a crisply-focussed photo of an innocuous but compelling object (in this case, the canopy of a palm tree) superimposed onto a false-colour abstract background.

Pages 34-35 show a view of the sky, looking directly at the sun (representing a marble?), which isn't actually visible, its position only apparent from the pattern of light on the obscuring clouds. '*Obscured By Clouds*' - no, I *don't* think that was deliberate, and I see no visual reference to that album's artwork! An overlain drawing of a flower (a sunflower, I think) links to the visual style of the previous spread. The inclusion of houses on a hill at the lower right of the image is compositionally a little odd, though I suppose it balances the text (lyrics to '*Fantastic Place*') at the top left, and somewhat reinforces the lyrics themselves.

Whilst the viewer looks up at the palm tree on p.32-33 and further up at the sky on p.34-35, for the final image of the '*Fantastic Place*' sequence, the viewpoint is downwards, at the feet of someone paddling on a beach. Though the whole image is strongly tinted turquoise, the source image has to be from the '*Radiation*' photo session - the setting, stance and robe match those of the torch bearer perfectly.

The images accompanying the '*The Only Unforgivable Thing*' lyrics (p.38-43) are of typical British street scenes, the lyrics displayed on road signs, billboards and a bus shelter in the characteristic typefaces of those media. The '*Marbles*' logo appears again on pages 42 and 43, on a bus stop and billboard, but they fit the setting rather better than the same usage on p.25, as the context is better established.

The crisp (almost artificially so) focus on the lyrics and static street furniture contrasts well with the blurred passing traffic photographed with a long exposure; the result echoes the cover of '*Marillion.com*'.

The bus stop image on p.42 shows the '*Marbles*' cover image generated from a photo of a different boy. Somehow this rendering doesn't work so well as the one that was chosen for the cover. Conversely, the cover image wouldn't work so well in p.42's mock advert. Good decision.

The giant marble on p.47 has been very effectively inserted into a Californian street scene - the lighting and unifying film grain are very convincing. Look carefully - the marble is the same one as used in the pastille packaging on p.13, rotated 90° anticlockwise and flipped left to right. Exactly the same photo is used again for the vast marble in the crater on pages 64-65.

The artwork of the '*Ocean Cloud*' pages (58-63) have a different feel to the rest of the book, being aged b&w/sepia blurred photos with a maritime theme: a coastline seen from a couple of kilometres offshore, a sailor looking out to sea from a ship's deck with a ghostly bearded figure in the foreground, and an indistinct blurred object which might

be an aerial view of a ship. The result is reminiscent of Porcupine Tree's *'In Absentia'* or something from *'Bass Communion'* or *'IEM'* rather than being typical Marillion imagery.

Halfway through the book, I'll pause there.

12 April, 2004

Review of Marillion *'Marbles'* artwork, pt.2

Continued from [here](#), this is the other half of my review of the artwork on the deluxe campaign edition of *'Marbles'*:

I initially thought page 67 showed a near-sphere of liquid, but on closer examination, it's a shattered marble (which supports the lyrics of *'Marbles III'* on the facing page), exhibiting a characteristic glass fracture pattern, not ripples. Unfortunately, I don't think the colour and graininess of the marble itself quite match those of the cityscape behind, so the composite image isn't entirely convincing. This is compounded by the opacity of a glass shard at the lower right and the shadow of the marble on nearby cars, which seem unnatural.

I mentioned Rorschach earlier: p. 68-69 couldn't be a more overt reference to the psychiatric test. So what do you see in the inkblot?

Pages 70-75 (the *'The Damage'* lyrics pages) employ a similar technique to that on p.24: certain people have been removed from each scene, leaving their shadows and silhouettes. Whereas on p.24 the silhouette was empty white, this time the silhouettes act as a window to a different, complementary image. On pages 70-71, three people in the foreground of a deep blue railway platform scene have been cut out to show close-ups of yellowish-green marbles against a bright white background (light box?). Could these be the people who have been 'enlightened' by hearing the album? One carried a shoulder bag displaying the Marbles logo - a nice touch. Oddly, five people in the background at the left of the image have featureless faces, like the businessman in the Pink Floyd *'Wish You Were Here'* album booklet.

On pages 72-73, the main image is crowded coastal promenade, whereas the view through the silhouettes in a deserted airport concourse - perhaps the route the people took to reach the seaside resort?

Page 74 is a city street, looking up at tall buildings. The colouring is strongly blue again, and also like p.70-71 the *'Marbles'* logo appears in red, this time in a street sign/light. In contrast to the tall buildings in the background, the view through the silhouettes (again yellow-green) shows a pedestrian subway (underpass), itself reminiscent of the *'Shot In The Dark'* cover.

Finally, p.75 is the portrait of a person sitting at an outdoor café table in bright sunlight. However the person him/herself has been removed, and the view is through to a lamp post at dusk (again tinted yellowish-green).

If there's a relevance to the image on p.76-77, of poppy seed pods against a pure white background, I don't really see it, unless it's an in-joke reference to *'The Opium Den'* from *'Brave'*.

I don't have much to say about the next eighteen pages, though since eight of them are a list of names and a further three have no images, that's not quite so much of a jump as it initially sounds. The images on the remaining seven pages supplement the lyrics in establishing the atmosphere of the songs, but that's for the listener to discover.

The sheet-metal dome on pages 96-97, could be a partial image of a sphere, and hence another variety of marble, but my immediate thought is of another Pink Floyd cover: the huge metal faces on the cover of *'The Division Bell'*.

Having spotted an apparent trend, one might regard the repeating rainbow motif in the *'Angelina'* pages (98-103) as yet another Pink Floyd homage, to the famous cover of *'Dark Side Of The Moon'*. However, the resemblance isn't otherwise particularly great, so that might be over-interpreting.

Pages 108-109 may be my favourite image: an unmodified photo of marbles lying amongst heavily frosted grass, the glass also frosted to near-opacity by moisture.

Page 111 has the final giant marble, framed within a bandstand. And it's not another iteration of that same marble photo!

The '*Neverland*' sequence on pages 120-125 is particularly effective: three very dark pre-dawn scenes linked by a band of artificial greenish-blue stars. The reference to Peter Pan is clear, as Neverland was found via "the second star to the right, and straight on 'til morning". Pages 120-121 show Whitehall from Westminster Bridge, London, UK (not 'England'), black silhouettes against a dark sky. On the left is the Palace of Westminster (aka Houses of Parliament), its turrets again reminding one of the '*Piston Broke*' cover. Dominating the image is St. Stephen's Tower, home of Big Ben (which most people now know is the name of the bell, not the clock or tower!). The clock shows the time to be 04:04 - the light level is that of a summer early morning, not a winter dusk, so I'm fairly sure it's not 16:04. I'm afraid I can't specifically identify the building on the right.

The subject of the image on p.122-123 puzzled me for a while, until I recognised the partially lit objects in the foreground as taps (faucets) - it's a view of a large building on a hill/island, seen through the condensation on a kitchen window. Then I read the accompanying lyrics, which mention 'Wendy' standing in the kitchen, dreaming - it might have saved time if I'd read that first!

The final image is a beautiful, though odd, view of sunlight breaking through abnormally dense cloud - in context, this could be a few minutes after dawn. The band of artificial stars has been reduced to a single star at the lower right - an excellent closing image. I'm a bit reluctant to spoil the illusion, but note that the star appears on the cloud, not clear sky.....

The band photos at the end of the book use the same effect as the slipcase cover - marbles held in front of the eyes of mirrored, perfectly symmetrical faces. However, in two cases, symmetry is broken: h's pendant is deliberately off-centre, and Pete's nose is naturally crooked (sorry, mate, but it is!), which has to be reproduced as-is or make him less recognisable.

So; 2723 words to review the packaging without mentioning the music itself. That's a first.