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The fans' band

The Marillion weekend at Butlins Holiday Camp is a law unto itself, discovers Steve Hands. Just don't dare call them prog

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Welcome to the Marillion Weekend at Butlins Holiday Camp in Minehead, Somerset. Billy Butlin's Shakespearean slogan "Our true intent is all for your delight" is nowhere to be seen. Too unwieldy after years of "Just do it", Butlin's slogan lacks the epigrammatic surety of today's über-brands. But advertisers could learn from what is touted in American law schools as "the Marillion model". This ain't rock'n'roll; it's data capture.

"Tell everyone, what's going on here is more beautiful than anything going on in rock and pop. I've seen excitement. I've seen obsession. This is affection." So says Marillion's lead singer, Steve Hogarth.

Not that long ago, a band of musicians truncated JRR Tolkien's least-favoured faerie-tale, *The Silmarillion*, and found fame and material success, if not in abundance, then certainly in quantities great enough to give them a comfortable living. After years of slowly declining sales, said minstrels began to tire of the dread control of infernal record companies. With few funds left to tour America, the band's loyal followers saw fit to raise \$60,000 to see their heroes perform in person.

Hogarth again: "This guy left a note on an internet forum, and he said, right, I'm going to open a bank account to fund the tour; if anyone wants to help, then send in some dough. Before we'd heard anything about it, he'd collected \$20,000. That really woke us up to two things. First, that the fans would do anything for us, and second, the internet would be a godsend. We began collecting data on our fans, and found out who they were. We thought, if we can talk to them, if we know where they are, then we don't need a record label any more."

Numerous support acts bolster the bill, but there's no doubting that three successive nights of entirely different Marillion performances are the central attraction. The first night featured the latest album in its entirety. *Marbles* is the second Marillion opus to have been financed entirely by fans paying up in advance. The £30 even covered the marketing campaign.

If it's Saturday, this must be the Marillion Pub Quiz. It's no place for the Marillion neophyte, but a team calling themselves Clutching at Straws are happy to include a heathen among the inner circle. Russell, 33, Andrew, 34, and Tim, also 34, all hail from Llanmorlais, in South Wales, and are accompanied by Claude, 37, from Malta. Russell is an insurance broker now based in Sydney. He reckons he has spent the best part of £1,000 in coming to the Marillion-fest; Claude paid out a measly £500 in comparison.

Tim, a lab technician for Corus, is responsible for the presence of the Welsh trio. It was via Marillion by Milkfloat that Russell became a long-life fan, after Tim recruited him for his milk-round way back in the days when Derek Dick (aka Fish) fronted the group. Still, the boys seem far more interested in the outcome of Wales's Six Nations showdown with Scotland.

Much of the quiz (Marillion questions only) is designed to split the men from the boys (and, yes, there are women here, too - I estimate a 70/30 split). For much of the quiz, Clutching at Straws are left scratching their collective noggins. Perennial teasers range from the concise (Whose grave does the narrator visit in "Beaujolais Days"? Answer: Jim Morrison) to the convoluted (What landmark is visible from the kitchen window in the Neverlands graphics of the *Marbles* limited-edition artwork?). For any dunces out there, the answer is, of course, St Michaels Mount, though the kindly adjudicator will accept the Houses of Parliament or Big Ben. Easy.

Sure, there's little for post-punk revivalists to get excited about, but what Marillion offer is improvised adult-orientated rock at its least self-satisfied. Second-night opener "Cover My Eyes" has something of the velocity of The Who's "Baba O'Riley", but for the most part the modern-day Marillion resemble nothing less than Talk Talk at their most ruminative. And though one of their DVDs may bear the Pink Floyd-alike title *Wish You Were Here*, there is little of the wordy, pseudo-classical excursions in Marillion's performances that constituted the backbone of the prog-rock gods of yore.

In fact, it is only at the mention of the P-word that the band splinters in opinion. Founder member Steve Rothery is conciliatory: "OK, you play music that isn't the three-minute pop song, that draws on all these different influences, does that make it prog rock? It doesn't have to be furry boots and capes."

But it's Hogarth that skirts uncharacteristic hostility. "Ask Thom Yorke if his band are prog rock, and he'll punch you. We've never mentioned an elf or a knight of the realm." There's always time, I venture. And Marillion's manager Lucy Jordache has this to say about the golden boy of Radio 2's Saturday schedule. "I'm convinced that Jonathan Ross is winding us up. He says that we're a prog-rock band that sing about goblins. Do you think I'd be going round with someone in a pointy hat?" Rothery adds: "We recorded *Script for a Jester's Tear* 22 years ago. I think that was when Ross had his own hair."

Hogarth is keen to put things in perspective. "People flock to Glastonbury, pitch tent in a muddy field, a toilet that's basically a hole in the ground. Compared with that, this is luxury."

And the band go further than most in breaking down the barrier between artist and audience in the Band Swap. After inviting demos from fans performing Marillion numbers, the band call the best on stage to perform with them. In an industry not known for humility, this is unprecedented. Best of all were appearances from the progeny of the astronaut Neil Armstrong (one son, one granddaughter), who join in on guitar and vocals for "Waiting to Happen". A true space cadet, 15-year old Kali (yes, really) out-sings many of the support acts.

On a sinister note, the bassist Pete Trewavas tells of fans in high places. He has the business card of one Eric Kessler, Chief of Staff in the US House of Representatives. Kessler said to look him up if he ever needs anything in Washington.

The Democratic Republic of Marillion draws ever nearer.