

The band that broke the mould

By Chris Leadbeater Last updated at 00:00am on 28.11.00

Early last summer, possibly on one of the two sunny days that made it through the rain clouds, something revolutionary happened that may change the record industry, and the way music is made, forever. A British rock band who have had hit singles here and big sales overseas decided that, rather than sign a new record deal, they would appeal to their fanbase to fund their next album.

So they e-mailed the 30,000 or so subscribers they have to their website and asked them whether they would be prepared to buy a CD that hadn't been made yet. Within two days they'd received 6,000 replies from would-be customers saying that yes, they would be happy to buy the unrecorded album and, what's more, hand over the cash straight away. Now the band are on course to receive 10,000 pre-orders before Christmas for an album that won't see a record shop sales rack until the Spring.

The whole process has raised them around £150,000, more than they could have expected had they signed a conventional record deal. But more importantly, it has shattered the unwritten rule that a group or artist must wait for a record company advance before entering the studio. And the name of the band? Oh yes, it's Marillion.

Ah, you think. Marillion. Aren't they that Eighties rock band with a massive Scottish lead singer who had a couple of hits 15 years ago. Didn't they have big widdly guitar solos, silly costume changes and songs that lasted for several hours? Bloody hell, are they still going? Aren't they used car salesmen by now?

Well pat yourself on the back, because you've identified the band correctly. Marillion are indeed the band who dominated the Top Five in the summer of 1985 with their singles Kayleigh (Number Two) and Lavender (Number Five). They are indeed the band who used to employ giant Scotsman Fish (oh, that was his name) on vocal duties. And they are indeed the band who fronted the short-lived Eighties progressive rock revival, sounding not a little unlike Genesis, and coping a huge amount of flak for it in the process.

But times change. In the decade or so since anyone outside their fanbase has heard them (their last hit was in 1992), Marillion's music has changed considerably. It now sounds more akin to the dark soundtracks made by Massive Attack or, whisper it quietly, like planet-conquering guitar heroes Radiohead. Some will even say that the band's epic 1993 album 'Brave' was OK Computer before said indie legends made OK Computer. Confused? We don't blame you.

"If we had known when I joined Marillion what we know now, we'd have changed the name and been a new band," sighs lead singer Steve Hogarth (Fish quit the band in 1988, a whole 12 years ago). "It was a mistake to keep the name, because what it represented in the mid-Eighties is a millstone we now carry. If we'd changed it, I think we would have been better off. We would have been judged for our music."

"It's such a grave injustice that the media constantly calls us a 'dinosaur prog band'," he continues. "They only say that out of ignorance because they haven't listened to anything we've done for the last 15 bloody years. If you hear anything we've done in the last five or six years, that description is totally irrelevant."

Those five or six years have seen the band confined to obscurity after leaving EMI, the record company they were signed to through the successful years, in 1995. It was partly this existence in the commercial wilderness that provoked their decision to appeal to their still solid fan base for funding.

"We'd come to the end of our record deal and there were various indie labels interested in us," Hogarth explains. "But we didn't feel comfortable with any of them. We're a band with a big fanbase, but the problem is that, as a result, no-one has an incentive to market us. Record labels know they could spend a fiver on promoting our album and our fans would still go and buy it if they had to find it under a stone. And

we knew what would happen if we signed to an indie label. They'd do nothing, sell the album to the fanbase and put the money in the bank. Basically our fans have been exploited by everyone but us for the last ten years."

Although the band have a certain safety net in the distribution deal they've recently signed with EMI that will help get the album delivered to the shops once released, it is the curious relationship with the fans that is the key to their continued existence. There was already a precedent for the funding appeal, dating back to 1997, when the band couldn't afford to tour the US. Hearing of their difficulties, the fivepiece's American fans clubbed together and raised \$60,000 that paid for the group to play several gigs on the other side of the Atlantic.

Despite this, Marillion were still surprised at the level of response they received to their online request. "When we first sent the e-mail out we kind of crossed our fingers," Hogarth muses. "When 95 per cent of the fans said 'yes', it was staggering. People keep saying what we've done is revolutionary, and I suppose it is. But really it's just an extension of the trust between us and the fans. If the trust wasn't there then doing something like this would be impossible."

Another classic example of Marillion fan loyalty occurred last year, when Radio 1 DJ Simon Mayo criticised the band live on air, and was deluged with complaining e-mails. He was eventually forced to interview the band's keyboard player Mark Kelly to calm the situation down.

To Hogarth, Mayo is a classic example of the barriers and perceptions the band are now struggling to overcome. "It's a massive frustration that no-one will play our stuff," he comments. "If we send our single to Radio 1 they say: 'Sorry, we don't play music by bands who are over so-many years old? and here's the new U2 single.' "I suppose it's something everyone has to cope with - every band are remembered for their big hit single, irrespective of how much they change over the years. But you can only transcend that by continuing to have hits. It's Catch 22."

Of course, the number of requests for the new, still unfinished Marillion album proves that, although the situation is frustrating, the band don't need hit singles to make a living from their music. And it has also brought with it a certain pressure to produce an album that justifies the fans' faith.

"Absolutely, the pressure's there," Hogarth laughs. "But that's good news, because we are making a good album. We're making a very modern record unlike anything we've done before. There are a lot of dub influences coming in - the success of Massive Attack has given us more confidence to go into that area. It's a long way from those old comparisons to Genesis and prog rock and blah blah blah?"

"You know, at some stage, someone has to notice that we're doing interesting things," he concludes. "Someday someone will take a retrospective look at us and be surprised."

If Marillion's new method of funding an album catches on, record companies and other bands will be more than surprised. They'll be changing the way they do business?

Marillion's new album can be ordered from www.marillion.com , and is set for release in April.