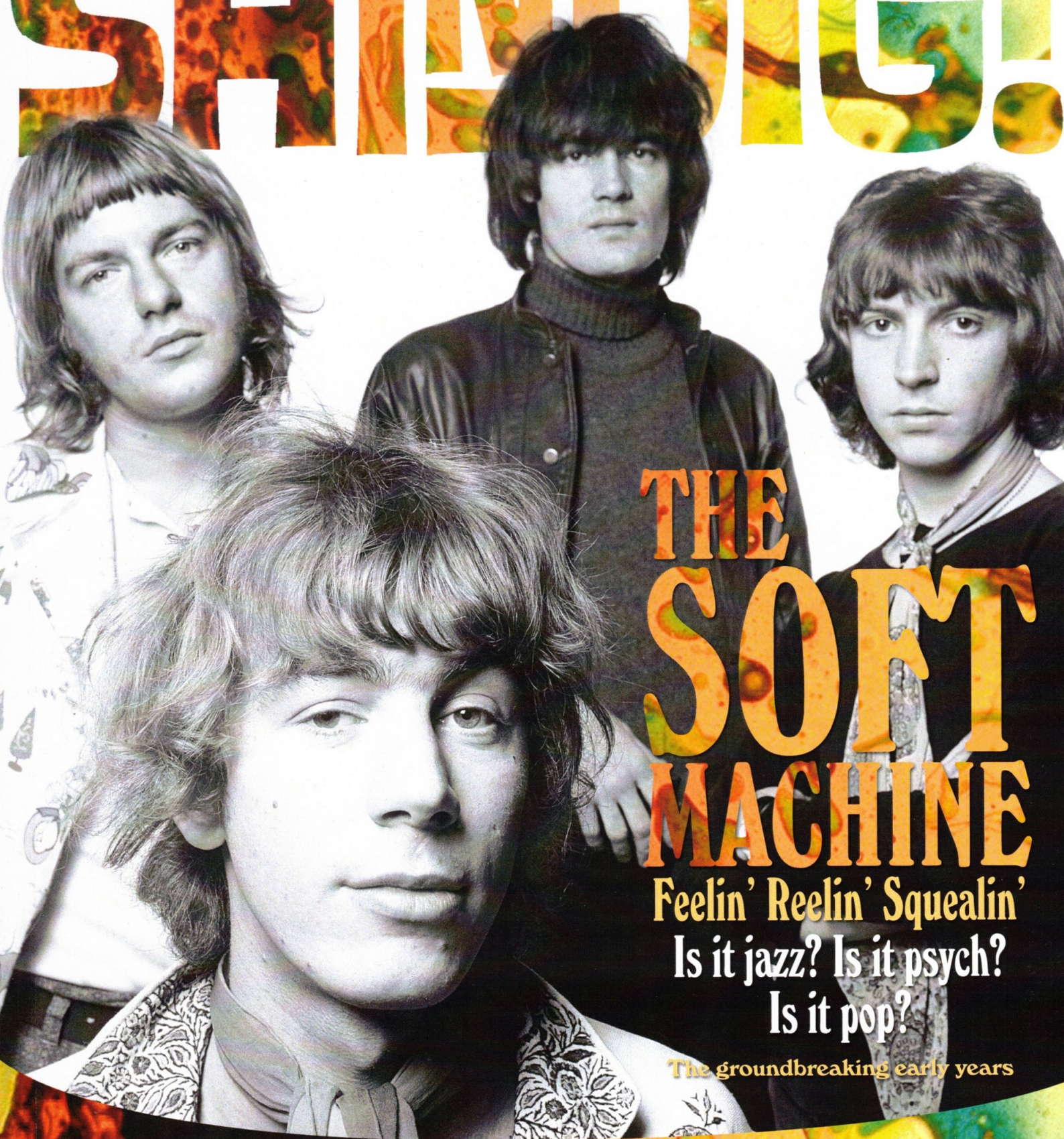


Psych, garage, prog, powerpop, soul, folk... for people who want more!

SHINDIG!



THE SOFT MACHINE

Feelin' Reelin' Squealin'
Is it jazz? Is it psych?
Is it pop?

The groundbreaking early years

MERRELL FANKHAUSER

His visionary journey from surf to folk to psych to lost continents!

THE LOVIN' & THE NERVE

From mod underdogs to Troggs-approved pop confectioners

ALLIED RECORDS

Plastic Cloud, Reign Ghost, Christmas... inside Canada's coolest label

EUPHORIA

The remarkable saga of the most expensive cult album ever made

JAN-FEB 2011 • ISSUE 20 • \$

9 771754 361013





Mike Ratledge, Hugh
Hopper and Robert Wyatt
circa *Volume Two*, 1969.

THIS IS WHAT HAPPENS

They outgrew their humble beginnings as Canterbury beatniks to become one of Britain's two most important and iconic underground bands of the late '60s before embarking on a singular jazz-rock odyssey that imploded in the mid-70s with not one of their original members intact.

"We could have made a really good LP," said Robert Wyatt. "Been in the charts and been in those films about the '60s – and we blew it."

LINDSAY BENSLEY delicately traces the evolution of THE SOFT MACHINE

It's sometime in 1967 (nowadays it's always sometime in '67 in my head) and I'm in our living room listening to our Pye transistor radio, tuned into one pirate station or another, when I should be doing my homework. Luckily, my sister is in the front room spinning her Dionne Warwick platters, while mother is away with the fairies in the garden tending her rose bushes, so I'm able to listen to whatever illegal station I choose. Suddenly, I hear 'Love Makes Sweet Music' crackling through the ether, a godsend to flaming youth if ever I heard one. While the name of the group makes little impression at this stage, the song receives frequent airplay and eventually lodges itself firmly in the junk room of my mind.

Nowadays it sounds like a lost anthem for that unforgettable summer, though at the time I thought it an energising atomic particle of pop that made me want to jump and shout and tell the world. But I was soon to learn that such danceable ditties were rarely encountered in The Soft Machine songbook. This was a band intent on reinventing the world in their own image, who would become the *wunderkinds* of the underground; whose "out there" musical musings prompted Phil Manzanera to claim: "Soft Machine were the grooviest, coolest psychedelic band of the era".

And behind their artistic ambitions there lurked an intelligence to match even impressed music critic and ribald raconteur, George Melly: "Soft Machine for a start are

not only verbally precise but exceptionally literate, with a keen and specialised interest in pataphysics, Dada and surrealism." Soft Machine lived life while others like myself looked on in dumbstruck awe.

Formed in '66, the group were briefly called The Bishops Of Canterbury, before guitarist Daavid Allen suggested they should change their name to Soft Machine after the drug culture novel by William S Burroughs. Besides Australian-born Allen, already an intergalactic guru, the line-up also comprised Kevin Ayers and Robert Wyatt, who were soon joined by Mike Ratledge upon his return from Oxford University after gaining an honours degree in psychology – a qualification that would come in useful during his tenure, if only for self-analysis.

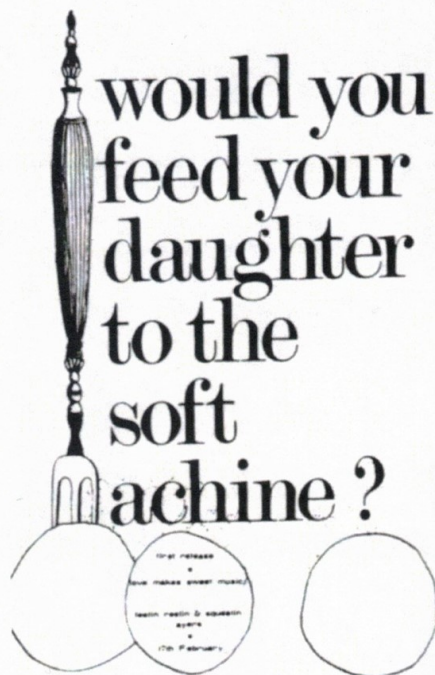


In September of that year they played the notorious Star Club in Hamburg, and though they had secured a three-night booking, a hostile audience ensured the contract was never fulfilled. Back in London they began to make regular appearances at The Marquee Club before a more receptive crowd, often supporting The Pink Floyd Sound, while also securing regular gigs at The UFO Club in Tottenham Court Road. In December they went into CBS Studios in London to record with Kim Fowley. Little came from this session except 'Feelin' Reelin' Squeelin', a lugubrious ditty penned by Kevin Ayers, whose deadpan delivery became his trademark.

A month later they entered Advision Studios to record 'Love Makes Sweet Music' with producer Chas Chandler, who thought the band had some degree of commercial potential. Released at the end of February '67 on Polydor, 'Love Makes Sweet Music' was coupled with 'Feelin' Reelin' Squeelin' to become a favourite among pirate DJs including John Peel, who featured the single frequently on his *Perfumed Garden* slot for Radio Caroline. Although it missed the hit parade by miles, it did make #26 in the Radio London chart.

In April, they again returned to the studio, this time to De Lane Lea under the guidance of Russian-born impresario Giorgio Gomelsky. These sessions, though funded by Gomelsky, were never released until Charly Records did so in the '70s. And while Allen has always expressed his displeasure with his contributions, these are nevertheless the most comprehensive recordings of the original line-up that survive.

The band at this stage of their development were still a wayward creation, and while



Gomelsky – a multi-media visionary – had failed to coax the best from them, he fared far better with The Brian Auger Trinity and the heavenly-blessed Blossom Toes, both of whom he signed to his own Marmalade label.

Undeterred, Soft Machine accepted an invitation to appear in The 14 Hour Technicolor Dream at Alexandra Palace at the end of April. This sight and sound extravaganza, which also featured The Pink Floyd, The Move, The Pretty Things and The Crazy World Of Arthur Brown among others, brought the group to the attention of the media.

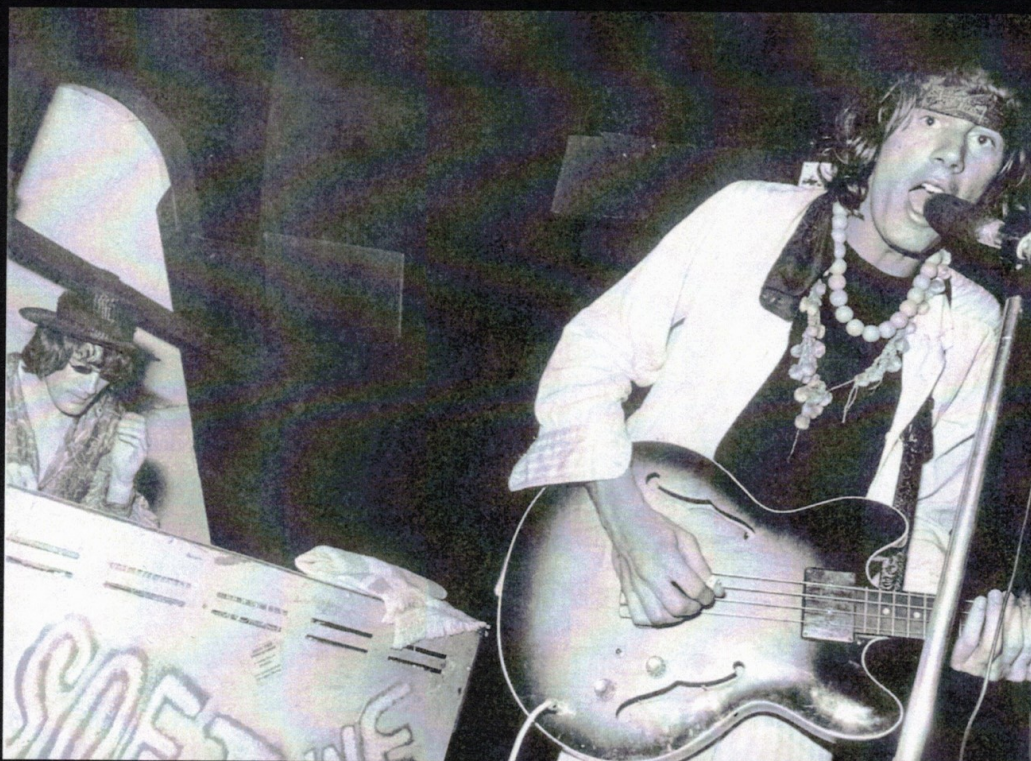
Mike Ratledge and Kevin Ayers at an early Softs gig.

The band spent the summer of '67 performing in France, mostly around St. Tropez, though usually without any noticeable financial gain. Half-starved and sleeping rough on the beaches, they were on the verge of quitting when a local theatre promoter secured them a series of gigs including two weeks at Eddie Barclay's Psychedelic Night where they even managed to perform Ayers' one-line mantra, 'We Did It Again', for over an hour, and also played in the nude at Jean-Jacques Lebel's Sunlove Happening on the Cote d'Azur.

Towards the end of August the band returned to England minus Daavid Allen, who was refused entry on the grounds that his visa had expired. Allen, unfazed, formed the intergalactic Gong who still record and tour the solar system and beyond to this day, attracting universal praise.

The Softs continued to perform as a three-piece and the following February an enthusiastic Chandler encouraged the group to embark upon a two-month American tour supporting The Jimi Hendrix Experience. While the band had already established a rapport with Hendrix – Wyatt and Ayers having previously guested on 'Stone Free' back in November '66 – American audiences did not always feel the same empathy, and were not averse to booing and heckling to express their impatience to see The Man With The Guitar!

It was an ill-conceived tour, set up by Jimi's manager, Mike Jeffery, who paid little attention to anyone's interests but his own. A dubious character who claimed affiliations with The Secret Service, Jeffery is alleged to have defrauded both The Animals and Hendrix of substantial earnings, and to have frequently used threatening behaviour with the aid of a handgun to make his point. Though it is almost impossible to say anything positive about Jeffery, he nevertheless secured Soft Machine a



recording contract with ABC/Probe Records.

So in April, at the end of their 50-date tour, they entered Record Plant Studios in New York to record their first album. With Tom Wilson as producer, the band spent four days recording a selection of their songs interspersed with a smattering of improvisations. Wilson, known for his work with The Mothers Of Invention and The Velvet Underground, appears to have been somewhat diffident and allowed the band a free hand, and they were not afraid to experiment with the studio technology to hand.

The resulting album was however an uneven affair. There are perusable moments; 'Hope For Happiness', 'Why Am I So Short?', 'Save Yourself' and 'We Did It Again', but the instrumental duets between Wyatt and Ayers on 'Joy Of A Toy' and 'Why Are We Sleeping?' provide the highlights. If nothing else, the album displays how sharp the interplay between these musicians had developed, and is often cited as an example of proto-jazz-rock come prog, even if some of the outings here do not reach a satisfactory conclusion.

In May the band returned to England and immediately enlisted guitarist Andy Summers, fresh from his stint with the short-

In July they returned to America to headline a few shows before joining Hendrix for a second US tour together. As before, because of the *avant-garde* stance, their set would sometimes attract hostility from both audience and promoters alike, especially when Ayers insisted upon performing 'We Did It Again' *ad nauseam*.

After this fractious short tour they ended up at The Chelsea Hotel in New York, where it fell to Wyatt to inform Summers that Ayers insisted he quit the band. Ayers claimed that he wanted to return to the three-piece format, though Summers has always believed – and with good reason – that Ayers resented his superior musical ability.

Supporting Hendrix, with whom they struck up a close friendship, they embarked upon an intense two-month tour, finishing up at Los Angeles. The unrelenting touring took its toll upon Ayers, who also expressed his dislike of the jazz-based workouts they now favoured. Without a hint of animosity, the rather louche Ayers decamped to Ibiza whereupon he set about forging a solo career and nurturing his predilection for the fruit of the vine.

In December the first Soft Machine album was finally released in the US and soon after in France and Holland where it gained good

Divided into two segments, 'Rivmic Melodies' and 'Esther's Nose Job', there are moments that capture their budding musical maturity and give some indication of the direction they intended to pursue, with 'Hibou', 'Anemone And Bear', 'Dada Was Here', 'Pig' and '10:30 Returns To The Bedroom' noticeably signposting their intentions.

Volume Two was released in April '69 to favourable reviews, and the band began to attract more attention from the media and public alike. Jazz-rock music was the fad at this point in time and Soft Machine were fast gaining distinction as one of its most competent exponents. Back on the road, gigging with renewed enthusiasm, they were seen at London's 100 Club by an equally enthusiastic Syd Barrett, who invited them to partake in recording sessions for his first solo album, *The Madcap Laughs*. In May '69, they joined Barrett at Abbey Road to record 'No Good Trying', 'Love You' and 'Clowns And Jugglers' (later retitled 'Octopus').

"The atmosphere in the house is a mix of cultured bohemianism and tribal village. Eating, shagging, smoking and drinking, and making music are all laced with scathing remarks to one another about diminished intellect."

lived Dantalian's Chariot (known by band members as Charabanc), Zoot Money's earnest riposte to psychedelia. Though they were briefly the darlings of the London underground scene, Summers was keen to engage with more non-traditional music makers on their own terms.

Taking up residence with Wyatt in his mother's house in West Dulwich, a sort of commune of extended family and friends, Summers recounts in his forthright autobiography, *One Train Later*: "The atmosphere in the house is a mix of cultured bohemianism and tribal village. Eating, shagging, smoking and drinking, and making music are all laced with scathing remarks to one another about diminished intellect."

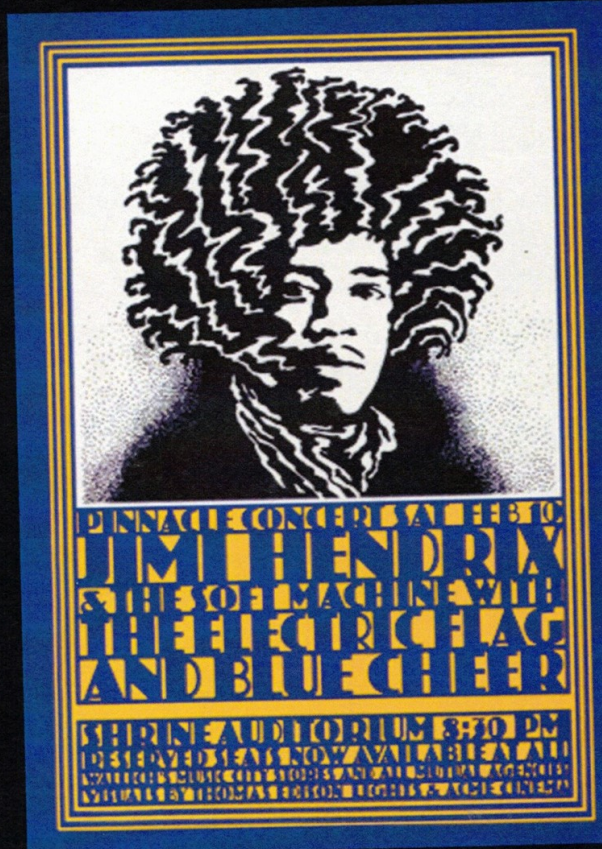
Summers, however, soon adapted to the lifestyle and the group spent several weeks in rehearsals. "In its best moments the music of The Soft Machine at this time is a swirling rush of dense, washy keyboards, repeated vocal lines, and drum patterns that fall outside any traditional song formats. In the vernacular of the moment, it would be called 'trippy'." These rehearsals often went on long into the night, usually ending with Wyatt and Summers smoking too much hash and falling on the floor in a fit of giggles. They made indeterminate progress.

reviews and healthy sales, though its release in the UK was indefensibly delayed until the early '70s. After a brief hiatus, the band reconvened at the beginning of '69, drafting in their long-suffering roadie, Hugh Hopper, to replace Ayers on bass.

Hopper, a more than capable replacement, already had a long association with Wyatt. Both had been part of the Canterbury scene since the early '60s. In '63 they formed The Wilde Flowers with Hugh's elder brother, Brian Hopper on guitar and sax, Richard Sinclair on rhythm guitar and Ayers as vocalist. Later additions included Richard Coughlan and Pye Hastings, who would later team up with Sinclair to form Caravan.

Like Wyatt and Ratledge, Hopper had a yearning for jazz, and in particular that of the post-war era of Mingus, Monk, Davis, Coleman and Coltrane *et al*, and with the departure of Ayers these influences began to permeate their playing more frequently.

Under contractual obligation to ABC/Probe, they entered Olympic Studios throughout February and March '69 to record their second album. More cohesive than the debut, it is underpinned by Wyatt's off-the-wall witticisms, though you can't help wondering if he's making them up as he goes along.



In June, The Softs recorded their first *Top Gear* session for Radio One at Maida Vale, and in between regular gigs – including dates at Ronnie Scott's – they also assisted Ayers on sessions for his debut album (which many justifiably regard as his best), *Joy Of A Toy* for the nascent Harvest label, before forming Kevin Ayers & The Whole World with fellow earthlings Mike Oldfield, Lol Coxhill and David Bedford.

Gradually The Softs' poppy proclivities gave way to more malleable jazz-rock fusions – much lengthier workouts with titles such as 'Mousetrap', 'Backwards', 'Eamonn Andrews', 'The Moon In June'. In October they expanded the line-up to a seven-piece with the addition of Marc Charig (cornet), Nick Evans (trombone), Lyn Dobson (soprano,

tenor sax and flute) and Elton Dean (alto sax and saxello). Their gigs were well received as they toured across England, France and Belgium, building up a strong following, while major record labels began to take an interest and they were eventually signed to CBS.

But the logistics of touring as a seven-piece outfit soon proved financially unrewarding. Electrical amplification also proved a bugbear for the horn section, who found it difficult to balance their sound with a powerhouse drummer and dominant keyboard player. Increasingly disenchanted, Charig and Evans left at the end of the year to join Chris McGregor's Brotherhood Of Breath.

In early January '70, the band were recorded at Fairfield Halls, Croydon and at Mothers Club, Birmingham by CBS, and this material would be used on their next album. By March, Dobson – his nerves now frazzled thanks to the lunatic lifestyle – also quit,

Robert Wyatt, Hugh Hopper and Mike Ratledge standing by the dock of the bay.



"I resented it for a while... I got cross... I used to feel about Soft Machine the way Palestine feels about Jerusalem - this once was mine."

finding brief solace in The Keef Hartley Band.

Reduced to a quartet, it would not have been unreasonable to presume this would have limited The Softs' possibilities, but nothing could have been further from the truth. This unexpected turn of events gave the band a renewed impetus, and created the legendary line-up that would produce some of the most enthralling and innovative music of the band's long and convoluted history. "I think we all soon realised the chemistry was right," recalled Dean.

Hopper, with an ear for a metallic riff, was now composing some of his best material, though Ratledge was the most prolific, and relished writing in complex time signatures that challenged both band and audience alike. The interplay between each member now gave the group a definable sound, which fortuitously coincided with the British jazz scene reaching its peak at the beginning of the '70s.

A trad jazz enthusiast in his teens, Dean later secured work as a member of Bluesology with Marc Charig, alongside numerous alumni including singers Marsha Hunt and Long John Baldry, guitarist Neil Hubbard and a struggling pianist named Reg Dwight, who would later pinch Dean's Christian name and Baldry's middle name (and his vocal mannerisms) to invent an entirely new persona. Unhappy with the pop music scene and backing talentless acts like The Paper Dolls, Dean and Marc enrolled at The Barry Jazz Summer School in South Wales at the height of the psychedelic movement of '67. Here they met Keith Tippett and Nick Evans, and the four discovered much common ground – and thus formed The Keith Tippett Group.

Tippett, already a formidable jazz pianist, had gained a grant from The Arts Council to compose a new work that ultimately resulted in the group's debut album, *You Are Here... I Am There* for Polydor, under the watchful eye of the far-sighted Gomelsky. Something of a hidden horde of bright baubles, it is a brash

under a gleeful groove: mesmerising stuff!

'Facelift' was also remarkable for being the first time that most people, like myself, encountered Dean playing the saxello. A variant of the soprano sax, to which it is physically similar – but for an upturned bell – its tone is not dissimilar to that of the Indian shehnai – which is in itself derived from the pungi, that stock-in-trade instrument of the snake charmer.

Wyatt's sole contribution, 'The Moon In June', is an effervescent eulogy from the illegitimate son of Mr G Chaucer (droll-teller), wherein by turn he confesses to being homesick and lovesick from his "hair to his heels". It was an almost entirely solo effort by Wyatt, who began work on the suite back in '67 and recorded some parts in New York at the end of their second American tour. Hopper and Ratledge make but minimal contributions to the piece (Wyatt mans the keyboards and bass for the most part), although jazz violinist Rab Spall provides a solo – doctored by Wyatt the Fizzy Wizard to resemble an out-take from Clanger Land – which makes a fitting coda.

Both the remaining compositions were furnished by Ratledge. 'Slightly All The Time' is one of his most compelling pieces – Zappaesque in parts with occasional quotes from Kirk and Coltrane, it interweaves tortuous time signatures to stunning effect. Ratledge and Dean produce some truly hair-raising solos throughout – and is that Wyatt playing the hi-hat with his hands? – while Jimmy Hastings (brother of Pye) offers support on flute and bass clarinet.

'Out-Bloody-Rageous' is no less arresting. Influenced by Terry Riley's hypnotic *Rainbow In Curved Air*, Ratledge employs tape loops to introduce another series of discursive solos by both himself and Dean before fading out in another tape collage.

Impressively tall, impossibly lean, his eyes invariably hidden behind a pair of modish sunshades, Ratledge looked every inch The King Of Cool – yet Warhol he wasn't. Reserved, reticent to the point of being monosyllabic, he never looked at ease in the spotlight and disliked touring intensely. Irrespective of his long-term involvement with Soft Machine and his undeniable musical contributions to the band, Ratledge remains something of an enigma entangled in a conundrum and wrapped up in a Gordian Knot of emotions. Nothing about him was ever predictable. Unlike his contemporaries Keith Emerson, Brian Auger and Dave Greenslade, who all preferred Hammond, Ratledge opted for a Lowrey Deluxe organ. When this was fed through a fuzzbox, he was forced to play legato to avoid intervals that would otherwise produce feedback. And so, more by accident than design, he invented his own distinctive sound, even if it frequently resembled a Stylophone on steroids.

Lauded on all sides upon its release, *Third* was the nearest the group ever came to anything approaching commercial success,

and determined musical statement by four of the best jazz players the UK has ever produced, and while quoting from Stan Tracey to The Beatles and all points in between, it possesses much original input. Dean, it must be said, would probably have been content to continue along this path had not Ratledge intervened and offered him the chance of playing in a more commercial jazz-rock outfit. In April '70 Soft Machine entered IBC Studios, London to commence work on their next album. Recording continued into May and the album was eventually released in June as a double album entitled *Third*. At a time when only established names such as The Beatles, Jimi Hendrix or Pink Floyd released double albums, *Third* was indeed an ambitious project, made more so by daringly featuring one grand opus per side. Hopper contributed 'Facelift', an energetic workout cut and spliced from the two live concerts recorded earlier that year – it's The Modern Jazz Quartet, Spontaneous Music Ensemble and Liberation Orchestra rolled into one nation

yet cracks were beginning to appear in the band's facade. Wyatt's sing-along songs were being increasingly sidelined in favour of hard-nosed instrumentals. Dadaism was dead and the Goon age was gone: they would never play vox pop again. However, unvoiced musical differences within the band did not disrupt the touring schedule. They continued to play regular dates at Ronnie Scott's and also found time to appear at The Holland Pop Festival ("the Dutch Woodstock") with the likes of Dr John, Canned Heat, Santana, Tyrannosaurus Rex *et al* – the resulting movie was later released as *Stamping Ground*.

In August they became the first "pop" band ever invited to play The Proms at The Royal Albert Hall. The rock press saw this as a prestigious gig and fawned at their feet, though the classical establishment were by and large appalled by the decision to allow a pop group to defecate upon their sacred turf. The straight-laced and stuffed shirt brigade of Radio 3 didn't like them, but ignoring their detractors, The Softs commenced recording their next album, *Fourth*, in October '70 at Olympic Sound Studios, with sessions continuing into November. Released the following March to favourable reviews, the album includes guest appearances by the ever-dependable Nick Evans, Marc Charig and Jimmy Hastings, with the addition of Roy Babbington on double bass and Alan Skidmore on tenor saxophone.

The bulk of the material was contributed by Hopper via the stately 'Kings And Queens' and 'Virtually', a four-part suite that took up all of side two. 'Teeth', the sole offering from Ratledge, is perhaps the best-conceived piece here. With fine structured and improvised contributions from both band and guest musicians, it sounds like a blueprint for what British jazz-rock fusion could and should have become.

A few weeks prior to the release of *Fourth*, I was finally able to catch the band in concert. A chance to see the classic line-up of Wyatt, Ratledge, Hopper and Dean was an unparalleled pleasure, and remains one of my most memorable gigs. In the absence of a stage, the band set up on the dance floor, with the audience seated all around. Granted an opportunity to watch the band at such close quarters proved a rare treat, and this level of intimacy contrarily enhanced their mystique.

Stripped to the waist, his long blonde hair



flying as he pummelled the drum kit, Wyatt was the only animated figure, reminiscent of The Wild Man of Borneo (minus the necklace of fingers), while you could easily have mistaken the other band members for serious Zapata lookalikes or the Plymouth Brethren. Yet these four just men were the component elements who could make music to soothe or stir the senses in equal measure. One lanky youth in the crowd stood up and began idiot dancing; a relatively new pastime then, and I had never witnessed such a spectacle before. I even bought a pint of Adnams Best Bitter (a Suffolk ale for a Norfolk swain?) – it was that sort of evening.

Oddly enough, the band's vigorous live performances did not in any way reflect their internal strife at the time. Even Dean admitted he was once removed from the unspoken discord. "I was too busy concentrating on the music to fully comprehend the personality issues going on around me. It was never discussed – there were no blazing rows. I got on well with Robert most of the time, we were good mates for a while, although we did have a bit of a disagreement during a tour of the States shortly before he quit. It's funny, but some of the best improvisation we did was during the period leading up to Robert's departure. If he wanted to carry on with the songs he never really said so. We didn't rehearse much or discuss direction, we would go on tour and things would happen, pieces would be written by Mike and Hugh and we would play them."

Hopper, Wyatt, Elton Dean and Ratledge not long before the drummer's departure.

Depending on which version of events you care to believe, Wyatt was either sacked or quit the band in August '71. "Towards the end there was no collective identity," adds Dean. "The others didn't see the same things as I in the band. I was more interested in absurdity as a liberating element than them." Wyatt expressed bitterness over his departure for several years afterwards, but on the BBC's recent *Prog Britannia* he appeared more philosophical. "I resented it for a while... I got cross... I used to feel about Soft Machine the way Palestine feels about Jerusalem – this once was mine." For whatever reasons, it is certain that the band's more studious approach to music did not suit a loose-limbed drummer like Wyatt who longed to sing the body electric. "We could have made a really good LP. Been in the charts and been in those films about the '60s – and we blew it."

Wyatt wasn't wrong. Soft Machine made jazz-rock fusion that was both accessible and listener-friendly, a rare feat in itself that others of their ilk were unable to accomplish. Wyatt's exit signalled the end of an earful of amazing music and sounds. Soft Machine had the potential to become a household name – like Fray Bentos or Threadgold's Throughgrip Garterettes. Ah, the sawdust and horses, the roar of the greasepaint, the smell of the crowd, it should all have been theirs, in that brief shining moment, there and then. If only the engine of time had a stop button... **SI**

