Off the Beaten Groove
Gowen's greatness

Before A Word Is Said, Alan Gowen, Phil Miller, Richard Sinclair, and Trevor Tomkins (on National Health's first album, Europeans) were fortunate enough to hear during the band's only tour. Would only more Americans know that group? Gowen's trademarks run rife throughout this album fly. Pyle's busy drum figures—"Polyrhythms" and his work with Phil Miller—"Four Winds"—Richard Sinclair contributes "Umbrella," a gentle mood piece highlighting his abilities as bassist and vocalist. Drummer Trevor Tomkins adds necessary coloring, but can hardly be considered a distinctive drummer; one wonders how these pieces might have sounded backed by Pip Pyle or Bill Bardo.

Gowen (keyboards) formed Gilgamesh in 1970, with Phil Lee (guitar), Mike Travis (drums), and Neal Murray (bass). Soon after its inception, Gilgamesh built up a following in Britain. The result of National Health's breakup. The new material remained unrecorded, until now. After the recording of the first Gilgamesh album, which prompted Gowen to join forces with Dave Stewart, Phil Miller, Pip Pyle, and others to form National Health. One eponymous album was recorded with this lineup before Gowen left to record a series of side projects including a second Gilgamesh album (with Lee, and new members Hugh Hopper and Trevor Tomkins), and a pair of records in collaboration with members from the seminal British jazz-rock ensemble Soft Machine.

The resulting discs (Rogue Element by Soft Head, and Soft Heap) united Gowen and Hopper with saxophonist Elton Dean for two acts of atmospheric modal jazz. In Miles Davis, a logical extension of the direction taken by Gowen's work with Gilgamesh. After a series of personnel shuffles Gowen found himself with National Health once again, just in time for its first tour of America. (A second Health album had been recorded, but the keyboards were provided by Dave Stewart, who subsequently left before the tour.) National Health arrived in Boston in November 1979, performing new unrecorded material composed by Gowen.

The new material remains unrecorded, the result of National Health's breakup. Gowen, reunited with Miller, Tomkins, and ex-Hatfield bassist Richard Sinclair, recorded Before A Word Is Said in April 1981. Gowen died from leukemia two weeks later.

Before is best characterized by Gowen's liner notes: "Considered initially by the respective musicians, the pieces were contributed to during rehearsals by all four men, and developed during recordings. This demanded an understanding of the writing and improvising. ... Although it is a collective performance, the album marks Miller's ascendancy as composer/guitarist extraordinary, almost to the point of stealing the show. Gowen's short, sketchy contributions seem, in contrast, unfinished.

Many of the tunes in this set recall Gowen's earlier work with Gilgamesh, there's a passionate, brooding feel to the proceedings that only he can create with his blazing electric piano chords and wash of synthesizer coloring. "Above and Below," the opening cut, typifies the ensemble's traditional improvisational style an opening theme, usually stated in unison (in this case guitar and Sinclair's vocalizing), followed by a series of solos leading into a recapitulation of the main theme.

Gowen's trademarks run rife throughout Before: its unmistakable synthesizer solos (single melodic lines with lots of pitch bending), frequent unison work, and stop-start rhythmic and chordal changes. The only complaint is with Gowen's reliance on all electronic keyboards. Some of the pieces — the title cut in particular — beg for a simple acoustic piano accompaniment, others merely require a different synthesizer voice.

The contributions of the rest of the band shouldn't be ignored: Phil Miller turns in some fluid, pretty guitar solos, particularly, in the Hatfield-esque "Four Winds." Richard Sinclair contributes "Umbrella," a gentle mood piece highlighting his abilities as bassist and vocalist. Drummer Trevor Tomkins adds necessary coloring, but can hardly be considered a distinctive drummer; one wonders how these pieces might have sounded backed by Pip Pyle or Bill Bardo.

Stewart's distinctive keyboard work, with its dense textures and block chordings, automatically distinguishes itself from Gowen's opposite single-line approach. Stewart is better suited to the large band format, where he can augment horn sections or vocals with his synthesizer swirls.

These ideals come together to create a near-perfect first side, exploring diverse textures ranging from the big-band fusion swing of "Portrait of a Shrinkin' Man" to the explosion "FIRE" to the meditative guitar-synth duet of "Arriving Twice." The second side's longer segments allow the soloists to stretch out a bit with material ("Flanagan's People," "Shining Water," and "Toad of Toad Hall") few Americans were fortunate enough to hear during the band's only tour. Would only more Americans turn their ears to this ensemble.

Before A Word Is Said and D.S. al Coda provide representative samples of both sides of Gowen's dual musical personality. These are essential recordings, destined to stand as milestones in the world of jazz-rock.

David Shaw