Off the Beaten Groove
Gowen's greatness


D.S. al Coda, National Health on Europa Records.

Almost two years ago a musician quietly passed away. Only now are we beginning to realize the extent of his influence on the British jazz-rock and progressive music scenes. The stateside release of many of his recordings will not make Alan Gowen a household name, but it will establish his reputation as one of Britain's major jazz talents.

Gowen (keyboards) formed Gilgamesh in 1973 with Phil Lee (guitar), Mike Travis (drums), and Neal Murray (bass). Soon after its inception, Gilgamesh built up a following in Britain, which led to a series of double quartet gigs with fellow progressivists Hatfield and the North, playing special arrangements written by Gowen. The palpable excitement of the band would prove to be fortuitous, harboring the seeds of future collaborations.

Gowen and the North disbanded soon 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 sponoraneous 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 duo (Rogue Element by Soft Head, and Soft Heap) reunited Gowen and Hopper with saxophonist Elton Deas for two sets 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 remained 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: "Conceived initially by the respective musicians, the pieces were contributed to during rehearsals by all four prospective musicians, the pieces were constructed during recording. This demanded an understanding of the work by all concerned. Although it is a collective performance, the album marks Miller's ascendency as composer/arranger, Hopper's extraordinary abilities at the point of the stealing the show. Gowen's short-sighted contributions seem, in contrast, unfinished.

Many of the tunes in this set recall Gowen's earlier work with Gilgamesh: there's a pensive, atmospheric feel to the proceedings that only he can create with his ringing electric piano chords and washes 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 riot throughout Before: his 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 compositions of the rest of the band shouldn't be ignored: Phil Miller turns in some fluid, pretty guitar solos, particularly in the Hatfield-esque "Worfield." Richard Sinclair contributes "Umbrellas," a gentle mood piece highlighting his abilities as bassist and vocalist. Drummer Trevor Tomkins adds necessary colorings, but can hardly be considered a distinctive drummer: one wonders how these pieces might have sounded backed by Pip Pyle or Bill Bruford.

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 ideas come together to create a near-perfect first side, exposing diverse textures ranging from the big-bang fusion swing of "Portrait of a Shrinking Man" to the explosive "TNTEX" to the meditative guitar-synth duel of "Arriving Twice." The second side's longer segments allow the soloists to stretch out a bit with material ("Flanagan's People," "Shining Water," "Toad of Toad Hall") few Americans were fortunate enough to hear during the band's only tour. Would only more Americans be familiar with this side, almost to the point of the stealing the show. Gowen's short-sighted contributions seem, in contrast, unfinished.

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