



Bio information: **SOFT MACHINE**

Title: **HØVIKODDEN 1971** (Cuneiform Rune 530/531/532/533)

Format: CD box set / VINYL box set / DIGITAL

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FILE UNDER: **ROCK / JAZZ-ROCK**

From their beginnings as a psychedelic rock band in 1966, sharing stages with Pink Floyd and the Jimi Hendrix Experience, to being one of the originators of electric jazz/rock by early 1969, Britain's SOFT MACHINE were restlessly creative. *Høvikodden 1971* captures them during two consecutive nights not long before the longest-lived and best-known version of the band ['the classic quartet'] was about to end.

Soft Machine's two concerts at the Henie-Onstad Art Center near Oslo, Norway, on February 27 and 28, 1971 were special in several respects. The circumstances, of course, were unusual...in a museum space, as part of an art exhibition by the Boyle Family, and Mark Boyle's films were projected during the performances. But more significantly, both shows were recorded, and superbly at that, providing a rare glimpse into how, at this stage in the band's existence, the music could change significantly from one night to the next, even when the setting didn't.

Mark Boyle, with his partner Joan Hills and their Sensual Laboratory light-show, had accompanied Soft Machine on many of their gigs in 1967–68, initially in the London underground clubs, then abroad in Europe and, most memorably, in North America on a tour supporting the Jimi Hendrix Experience. Since parting ways in March 1968, there had been a couple of reunions of which this was the next to last.

Soft Machine likely owed the opportunity to perform in Norway to their association and friendship with Boyle, as they were still relatively unknown in the country. Indeed it would be five years before a band bearing that name (but containing none of the same musicians) would again visit Norway, as part of a European tour supporting John McLaughlin's Shakti. This being said, a small but dedicated contingent of local Soft Machine enthusiasts did exist, and indeed demand for the Saturday concert was sufficient for a second one to be added on the Sunday.

In the audience for both concerts was fan Hans Voigt. "I'd discovered *Volume Two*—still my favorite of their albums—about a year before. It was love at first listen! Within a short time I also acquired the first album and *Third*. I was totally hooked! When I heard rumors that they were coming to Norway, I couldn't wait. The concerts gave me *almost* all I wanted—I say 'almost' because they didn't play "Moon in June," and Robert no longer sang much at that point. Meeting the band before and after the concerts, I got the impression that although the performances were fantastic, the atmosphere within the band wasn't the best. Later that year, as you know, Robert left the band...."

Voigt would later play a crucial role in unearthing the tapes of both concerts. "I knew they'd been recorded. A colleague of mine at the Norske Teatret, where I worked as stage manager in the '70s, was sound engineer Meny Bloch, and I actually remembered seeing him at the gigs with his tape machine connected to the mixing desk." The German-born Bloch was hired for important recordings at the art center. For these he used a Studer A62 2-track recorder and a pair of Neumann microphones. "I got in touch with the library, and someone there located the actual master tapes; the new transfers from Norway's National Library are exceptional, and have been further improved by expert mixing and mastering."

The performances follow the long-established Soft Machine tradition of two continuous sets, plus an encore. By early 1971 the repertoire had settled down, much like the band itself following several line-up changes in 1969–70, and would indeed remain unchanged until Robert Wyatt's departure after the July 1971 US tour. The lion's share of the set came from *Third* and the newly-released *Fourth*, with a few extras—"Neo- Caliban Grides," soon to appear on Elton Dean's self-titled solo album; "All White," the only new composition in the set (and the only one to utilize Ratledge's newly-acquired Fender Rhodes piano); and "Pigling Bland," which, despite appearing alongside "All White" on 1972's *Fifth*, actually dated back to 1969, having been written as a new ending for the septet arrangement of "Esther's Nose Job."

Fourth showed the band at a crossroads, its contents ranging from "Teeth," Ratledge's last (and arguably most successful) attempt at ambitious episodic structures, to the out-and-out free improv of "Fletcher's Blemish" (notwithstanding the occasional unison riffs that pop up here and there), while Hopper's sidelong, 4- part "Virtually" explored a middle ground.

While the two sets from the second night (February 28, 1971) have been released before, they have been unavailable for over a decade and this set is the first time that the entire two-night stand has been released. So half of this is previously completely unreleased.

This is an excellent, stereo recording of the band performing in a relatively small hall; the balances between the instruments are not perfectly balanced, but there is no other recording by Soft Machine that sounds as much like the band are performing *right* in front of you! Additionally, we were able to improve in a modest but definitely noticeable way the not-perfect balance between the instruments on this complete presentation of both night's performances!