Synthesizer Dreams

*Electrical Language*, *Independent British Synth Pop 78-84*
(4CD box set, Cherry Red)

 'I speak to you through electrical language
 Sometimes you hear me when our frequencies meet
 You try to listen but you don't understand it
 Turn up the rhythm and you'll pick up the beat'
 – 'Electrical Language', Be Bop Deluxe

Cherry Red's box sets simply get better and better. This one starts with a morse code beep as Thomas Dolby's synthesizers and plaintive vocals slowly enter the musical space, and then we are off, on a rollercoaster ride of the known, unknown, classic and forgotten music from a whole host of names, future popstars, would-be popstars, no-hopers and legends-in-their-own bedrooms.

Whoever has curated and put this together has certainly done a great job. Key tracks from The Normal, The Human League, Fad Gadget, Colourbox, Faction, The Passage, Dalek I and Orchestral Manouevres in the Dark, all on their way to at least cult success, mingle with Be-Bop Deluxe reinventing themselves, Eyeless in Gaza, Section 25, the wonderful pseudo-teutonic burblings of Schlëimer K, Chris and Cosey and Pink Industry. One-man band Play get an outing here, although it's not his fantastic 'In My Mind', as do Thomas Leer, Naked Lunch and Robert Calvert, seemingly on holiday from Hawkwind.

Then there are loads of new or forgotten bands and songs to consider or be reminded of. It can't be just me though that hasn't heard of lots of them? But that's not a problem. The declamatory histrionics of The Bhodi-Beat Poets' 'Your Love Is Like a Slug' is great, so is The Fast Set's sludge-tempo cover of 'Children of the Revolution'. (Never has a band been so mis-named!). A similar doomy disposition informs Jesus Couldn't Drum's track here, but tracks by the likes of Time in Motion and Ice the Falling Rain are chirpier and upbeat.

What's amazing is that it appears everyone here thought in terms of pop music. Whilst the likes of New Music, the Thomas Dolby and The Human League would of course achieve chart success, it's little surprise that most of this didn't. That doesn't mean this mass gathering of squeaking, honking, pre-sets and insistent drum-machines isn't fascinating and great music, but it does make one wonder how naive so many musicians could be! Or maybe they weren't all writing pop, maybe that's a conceit by the anthologisers? As is, perhaps, the idea that all the musicians gathered here 'discarded the guitar and the drum kit overnight in their pursuit of something fresh that their generation could truly call their own'.

But let's not quibble, though I do have a few complaints: Why is old hippy Tim Blake here? Or the ubiquitous and permanently out-of-tune and time Legendary Pink Dots? More importantly, where are Fäshion, The Technos, Attrition, V-Sor,X or Cabaret Voltaire? And if we are to endure Beasts in Cages' cover of Alvin Stardust's 'My Coo Ca Choo' couldn't we have Shock's glorious deconstructive version of 'Angel Face'? Praise? Everything else. The booklet is a wonderful piece of design full of groovy photos and fun-filled facts, and this synth-pop box-set truly does evidence a time when 'the future looked bright, albeit illuminated with electric light'.

 Rupert Loydell