

The Machine That Changed The World

Other Doors, Soft Machine (CD, Dyad Records)

The opening track of *Other Doors* reminds me of *Shamal* era Gong and the start of Pink Floyd's 'Shine On You Crazy Diamond': gentle echoing bass, wailing fluid guitar, and soaring flute. That's not a criticism by the way... The next track, 'Penny Hitch', continues with the gentle groove, but things do get a bit more complex and upbeat as the track progresses, with a wonderfully uplifting saxophone solo from Theo Travis, and more busy guitar work from John Etheridge who is on fine form throughout this album.

It's pleasing to see that the band have chosen to simply use the Soft Machine moniker rather than append it with 'Legacy' or use any other variant. Also that previous member Roy Babbington features on a couple of tracks, and that the current incarnation give the musical nod to the band's past by including a couple of older tracks, including Kevin Ayers' 'Joy of a Toy' from their very first album along with the aforementioned 'Penny Hitch' from the unjustly ignored album *Seven*. Less pleasing but understandable is that drummer John Marshall, now a young 81 years old, has said this will be his final studio recording and announced his retirement.

There's no let up in Marshall's playing though, and new member Fred Thelonius Baker is no slouch on fretless bass either. This quartet are all about subtlety, shading and dynamics, and if I miss the earth-shaking bass of Hugh Hopper or the belting jazz-rock of *Bundles*, that's my problem. This is a more stately, expansive and considered group with a tendency for making exquisite miniatures rather than extended wigouts. Marshall's percussion and drumming is restrained throughout, adding as much texture as rhythm, and Baker's bass is almost lead bass at times, but it is Etheridge and Travis who are the real standouts here.

Etheridge is a virtuoso guitarist, and always has been. And by that I don't mean he goes in for hair-raising over-busy solos up and down the fretboard. No, he has an exquisite ear for soundscapes, melody, light and shade, as well as dynamics and presence. When he played in our village hall a few years back his set included mutated blues, jazz-rock, echoing ambient music, and straightforward tunes... no showing off, just superb musicianship and entertainment. Which is what he contributes here, often alongside Travis' parts, which include keyboard duties as well as flutes, saxophones and what is listed as 'electronics'. (Whether that is effects, treatments or just the strange bleeps on 'Maybe Never' I don't know.) Travis seems to be able to play with anyone these days, from the recent big-band version of King Crimson to improvised duets with Robert Fripp, via solo work, later incarnations of Gong, to session work with a huge roster of bands. I'm not surprised on the evidence here.

If there aren't extended compositions or a sense of ground-breaking new music here, there is an accomplished and intriguing collection of mostly brief tracks,

full of musical surprises and glorious moments, made by a band with an unfailing musical ear, a huge skill set, and – most importantly – a shared sense of heritage and purpose. It will be very interesting to see what *Other Doors* lead to next.

Rupert Loydell