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Bio information: **SOFT MACHINE**

Title: **FACELIFT FRANCE AND HOLLAND** (Cuneiform Rune 495/496/497)

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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
FACELIFT FRANCE AND HOLLAND
Captures Them at a Pivotal Moment in the First Quarter of 1970 as a Short-Lived Quintet
Just Before They Recorded and Released Their Breakthrough Album *Third***

As broadcast on the French TV programme *Pop 2*, the film of Soft Machine's concert at Paris' Théâtre de la Musique, which constitutes the main course of the present release, stands as an exceptional document of the band at, arguably, its artistic peak. It is also the only video footage known to exist of the quintet line-up that was active from January to March 1970, and contains the only professionally-recorded performance of "Out-Bloody-Rageous" with Lyn Dobson on second sax, as well as the only professionally-recorded alternative performance by the quintet of "Facelift".

Until the release, nearly 30 years later, of *Noisette* (Cuneiform), "Facelift" on *Third* (itself edited to include segments from other studio and live tapes) had remained the quintet's sole recorded legacy. *Noisette* presented the rest of the Fairfield Halls concert of January 4, 1970 captured by sound engineer and band friend Bob Woolford, and has often been singled out as the best of the many Soft Machine archival releases. Another album, *Breda Reactor*, was taken from a poorly recorded Dutch gig later that same month, with an identical setlist save for the inclusion of a brief section of the future "Out-Bloody-Rageous" during "Esther's Nose Job." By the time of the *Pop 2* performance, it had grown into the Ratledge tour-de-force that would later occupy the last side of *Third*.

Another new Ratledge composition—then untitled but soon to become the first half of "Slightly All the Time"—was unveiled on the French tour. Unfortunately, as the audience recording of the Théâtre de la Musique concert (included as a bonus on the DVD) reveals, this, along with nearly half of the second set, was left out of the edited broadcast (compared to just five minutes from the admittedly much-shorter first set, i.e., "Mousetrap" and "Noisette"). Because of its historical significance and despite its inferior sound quality, "Slightly All the Time" has been inserted back into the performance as presented on Disc 1, along with a brief excerpt of "Moon in June" which smoothens the transition to Robert Wyatt's vocal improvisation.

And to make this release an even more complete representation of Soft Machine's live set during this period, Disc 3 presents a previously unreleased performance at Amsterdam's Concertgebouw from January 1970 from a soundboard source. Heard in excellent sound are Hugh Hopper's "12/8 Theme" (never recorded in the studio, and save for Hugh's solo rendition on *Monster Band*, unheard until *Noisette*) and a complete "Esther's Nose Job," unlike the truncated version shown in *Pop 2*.

Pop 2, which aired from April 1970 to December 1973, was the brainchild of producer Maurice Dumay (a former program manager for Europe 1 radio), who chose to surround himself with a young team spearheaded by director Claude Ventura, whose innovative, reportage-like camera work had already been a trademark of *Tous en Scène*, recently taken off the air for blasphemy. That a French TV show about rock music should choose to devote its entire premiere, as well as another subsequent edition, to Soft Machine, may seem incredible in retrospect, and probably merits an explanation.

The band's love story with France had begun in the summer of 1967, when the original lineup had somehow found itself providing live musical accompaniment to *happening* artist Jean-Jacques Lebel's production of Picasso's *Le Désir attrapé par la queue* during its ill-fated sojourn on the French Riviera. The play became that summer's *succès de scandale*, and made "La Machine Molle" instant stars: Eddie Barclay hired Soft Machine for his ultra-hip *Nuit Psychédélique* in Saint-Tropez, and leading magazine *Le Nouvel Observateur* promptly dubbed them "the new Beatles." When they crossed the Channel again to perform at the Paris Biennale that autumn, they were duly invited to appear on several high-profile TV shows (*Dim Dam Dom*, *Caméra III*, *Bouton Rouge*), and by the time they played at *La Fenêtre Rose*—France's answer to London's *14-Hour Technicolor Dream*—in November 1967, their status as one of the top British groups was established.

Despite disappearing for the whole of 1968, first touring America with the Jimi Hendrix Experience and then temporarily disbanding, when Soft Machine returned to Paris in June 1969 to headline a festival at the Bataclan showcasing the new generation of French bands, they had lost none of their popularity, and once again they appeared on French TV's rock programs of the day—*Forum Musiques* and the above-mentioned *Tous en Scène*.

The band's commercial potential seemed big enough to its French agent Norbert Gamsohn that he set about organizing a major tour of the country's new Maisons de la Culture circuit. Such was the scale of the eventual itinerary—over 30 dates, divided into two legs, the first in December 1969, the second in February–March 1970—that it allowed the trio to afford what they'd been contemplating for a while already: add a brass section, mostly borrowed from the Keith Tippett Group. Regrettably, that septet line-up was already history by the time the second leg took place: for practical as well as economic reasons, it had been trimmed down to a quintet.

The venue chosen for the Soft Machine's Paris concert was the Théâtre de la Musique, originally (and better) known as La Gaîté-Lyrique. A fine example of Second Empire architecture, it had been built in the early 1860s, soon becoming Paris' most popular showplace when it hosted Offenbach's most famous operettas. With some notable exceptions like the 1918 Ballets Russes season, the 20th century proved less sympathetic to the theatre, which by the early 1960s, lay virtually abandoned as a music venue. It was briefly revived in 1970, and in addition to the Softs, the venerable 1,500-capacity hall also hosted memorable concerts by Magma and Gong. Various attempts at reviving the venue, including as a museum, were short-lived, although recently, it began hosting concerts (and other events) again as La Gaîté-Lyrique.

In order to accommodate the program's 40-minute format, the edited concert was broadcast in two segments: the first on its April 30 premiere, and the second on July 23, ostensibly to coincide with the band's scheduled (but ultimately cancelled) midsummer appearances in several festivals in the South of France.

There is little to fault with either the sonics or visuals of the footage—the occasional, disconcerting and annoying outbursts of fake applause and cheers, mixed in at seemingly random intervals on the original broadcast, have been minimized here, thanks to the discovery in the INA archives of an earlier, work-in-progress edit of the first set and, wherever else the issue manifested itself, using the audience source as patches. All in all, no effort has been spared to ensure that this is the best this performance has ever sounded and looked.

And good it certainly looks. There is a cinematographic quality to Ventura's choice of unusual camera angles, for instance when he films the band from behind the stage, capturing otherwise unseen activity—like Softs roadie Tony Wiggins chatting with Elton Dean or maneuvering Robert Wyatt's overhead mic in time for his scat solo during “Esther's Nose Job.” Yet his camera never strays away from the main action for too long. The visual dimension adds much to the enjoyment derived from the music. One gets a better sense of Wyatt's physical abandon, both as drummer and singer—his Echoplexed vocal improvisation here, graced with uncharacteristically sympathetic backing from the rest of the group, is among his best; of the introverted yet asserted presence of Ratledge and Hopper; and of the surprisingly well-behaved playing of dual saxists Dean and Dobson—although the latter gets quite a bit wilder during the drone section in “Facelift.” Oddly enough the only drinks in sight are Orangina bottles, prominently displayed on top of the amps in lieu of the usual beer—clearly not your average rock group!

Let's leave the final word to Lyn Dobson, who left the band soon after this performance. “I think that what Soft Machine did was totally original. Robert, Hugh and Mike... Between them it was a fantastic combination. There was a kind of chemical difference between them, but it was out of that tension that something amazing happened. Later it became more watered down, more like everything else that was around—what they called jazz-rock. But what we did was something else altogether... More like rock-jazz, if you like. Very powerful music!” Indeed.

PROMOTIONAL PHOTOS

Digital [High-Resolution] versions of these images are available on the **Soft Machine** artist page @ cuneiformrecords.com

