King Crimson
Reissues

Fill in the gaps in your Crimson collection with these superbly presented reissues.

Guest Reviewer
Bill Nelson

King Crimson's first album, *In The Court Of The Crimson King*, was released in 1969, and it single-handedly created the template for what would become commonly known as progressive rock. The term implied modernity, forward movement, an open-ended process of development, refining and expanding what had gone before.

I remember buying *In The Court Of The Crimson King* and being initially seduced by two things: the imaginative use of the Mellotron (a sort of early and slightly erie sampling keyboard that used audio tapes of recorded real instruments as its sound source), and the complex and technically demanding guitar work of Robert Fripp.

In many ways it felt as if King Crimson's music had sprung fresh from some previously unexplored fountain of sound. Although the music was described by many listeners as futuristic, there were also antique overtones, copper and brass curlicues, curious ornaments, elements that owed as much to Mervyn Peake and the late 1800s romances of George MacDonald, as to any of Kurt Vonnegut's or JG Ballard's dystopian futurescapes.

Astonishingly, it's now 41 years since *In The Court...* was released. In fact, it was the only King Crimson album I ever owned until I bought their Disciple album in 1981. Consequently, there's a huge gap in my knowledge of all things Crimson, a gap which makes the prospect of reviewing these new re-reissues of *In The Wake Of Poseidon* and *Islands* all the more daunting. This isn't music that can be assessed superficially.

*In The Wake Of Poseidon* was the second King Crimson album, released in 1970 after the original band had, apparently, broken up. Fripp's determination to keep the KC concept alive and kicking led him to conscript Peter Giles from his earlier band, andFripp group along with Keith Tippett, Mel Collins and Gordon Haskell, and the departing KC members Michael Giles and Greg Lake. The resulting sessions produced an album that retained the core sonic elements from the first King Crimson group while introducing new touches, particularly the piano contributions from Keith Tippett, and saxophone and flute textures from Mel Collins.

As with all of Robert Fripp's projects, the group's musicianship is impeccable, the arrangements complex and challenging. A single track could furnish a lesser band with enough ideas for an entire album. This is not, by any means, music spread thin.

There are moments in *Pictures Of A City* that conjure images of a perverse swing band soundtrack a surrealist sixties spy film, while simultaneously referencing the previous album's 21st Century Schizoid Man intensity.

By way of contrast, the acoustic guitar-based Cadence And Cascade introduces a folk-jazz prettiness that serves as a springboard for Mel Collins' dancing flute improvisations. The ethereal Mellotron returns to provide a strongly atmospheric opening statement during the album's title track, while on Cat Food, Keith Tippett's random piano brings to mind Cecil Taylor, throwing spicy, broken shards of ice across the mix. The Devil's Triangle (Part III) enters free-improv territory, snarling, banging and clattering along, a berserk machine out of control on a nightmarish Jean Tinguely railroad. But it's not all teeth-clenching, avant-garde intensity. There are whimsical moments, tracks with empty scenes where only a bass guitar and a whisper of percussion stop the music teetering into a silent void. There are ever-so-subtle hints of Beatle-esque pop and, despite the undeniable Englishness of it all, a trippy looseness that evokes the American West Coast underground scene of the 60s. The music does have its roots, after all, though some of them are curiously twisted.

*Islands*. Crimson's fourth album, first released in 1971, retains Mel Collins and Keith Tippett from the Poseidon line up, but has Boz Burrell and Ian Wallace in the rhythm section, plus oboe, soprano, cornet and string bass contributions from several other featured players. Many of the compositions, as per previous KC albums, frame the lyrics of Pete Sinfield. These take a delightfully perverse turn on the rafter naughty Ladies Of The Road, which also contains some nice reversed guitar flourishes.

Sailor's Tale begins with a tightly structured ensemble melody with Fripp's guitar sitting snugly within the horn section before hitting a squall of free improv. The guitar solo is particularly quirky here, heavily processed and angular. When it re-enters towards the conclusion of the piece, strumming furiously, it almost sounds like a demented ukelele player has joined in—a George Formby from Hell.

Although the improvisational aspect of the band is well in evidence, there seems to be a slightly more focussed approach to the compositional arrangements. Prelude: Song Of The Gulls is an exquisite Fripp composition in a neo-classical style, a charming chamber piece and, for me, an unexpected surprise. The album's title track is quite beautiful. Flowing and elegiac with a featured cornet solo by Daryl Chorag. What I haven't mentioned is that these two albums have not just been remastered, but actually remixed by Steven Wilson (of Porcupine Tree) and Robert Fripp, all as part of an extensive 40th anniversary series of KC releases. The full package for each album will contain two discs in a digipack format, containing the original mixes and the 2010 remixes, plus DVD-A versions in different formats, bonus tracks, unreleased material, rare photos and archive material. As someone who appreciates attention to detail, it's encouraging to know that there are still record labels out there who are willing to spend time and money producing releases that do proper justice to the music, and realise that listeners can be just as demanding as the musicians themselves.

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Bill Nelson

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*In The Wake...*  
*Islands*
Strictly Regal

King Crimson
In the Wake Of Poseidon/Islands

By the time King Crimson released *In The Wake Of Poseidon*, the band had already started to splinter. Ian McDonald and Michael Giles had left and Greg Lake was looking into the idea of jumping ship and doing something with Keith Emerson. Minor details like his band falling apart barely dented Robert Fripp's enthusiasm for making good on the promise of *In The Court Of The Crimson King*. Their second album is arguably their best; it was certainly their most successful commercially, breaking into the top five album charts when that really used to mean something. It's Fripp's album in a way, even if his guitar does take an occasional backseat to the Mellotron he took over from McDonald. *Cadence And Cascade* still sounds beautifully realised, expressive and dense, it also appears here as an extra that includes Greg Lake's guide vocal. An alternate mix of *Peace: An End* doesn't stray too far from the original album closer while *The Devil's Triangle* still owes much to Holst's *The Planets*, but is no less striking for that. Bombastic and thundering, it must have made heads spin on its initial release and time's done little to diminish its impact especially in 5.1 surround where it sounds like Fripp's turning your dining table over. It's the only song on the album that Steven Wilson hasn't worked up as a remix and given the wonders he's performed elsewhere on this reissue it would have been interesting to see what dark magic he might have drawn from the source material. It would have caused the dishes to vibrate off your sideboard at the very least. Perhaps with hindsight that the band's fourth album was the weakest of the first incarnation of King Crimson, this latest version of Islands comes complete with a multitude of extras as if making up for the fact. The original shone briefly and brightly in the magnificent *Sailor's Tale* and the immediate (and raunchy) feel of *Ladies Of The Road*. But at other points it dawdled, lacking commitment or cohesiveness. Happily, they've gone to town with the extras, with original session versions of *Sailor's Tale* and *Formentera Lady*, the unreleased *Unrolls* and a rehearsal version of *The Letters*. Wilson and Fripp have also collaborated on a new stereo mix of the entire album. There's an anniversary remaster of the original album, a so-called *Alternative* album with rough mixes and edits plus an *Assorted Ladies* set that collates different session takes of *Ladies Of The Road* and *Formentera Lady*. Do you see what they did there? Most intriguing, however, is the *Routes To Islands* set with rehearsal versions and rough mixes of the songs that made up the album.

The sketches of *Pictures Of A City* and *Sailor's Tale* are particularly noteworthy and proof that jamming with Fripp must be like attempting advanced algebra. The latter is also included as a sparkingly live version at the Zoom Club, King Crimson with all guns blazing.

Philip Wilding
King Crimson
In The Wake Of Poseidon

Panegyric, cat no tbc (CD+DVD)

Islands

Panegyric, cat no tbc (CD+DVD)

1970 and '71 outings stir tale novices and enthral adherents

The packaging for these reissues is a dream, making them instant five-star releases for King Crimson fans and collectors alike, boasting original stereo mixes and new ones by Robert Fripp and Porcupine Tree’s Steven Wilson.

The slipcased digipaks (with booklet) see In The Wake add three bonus cuts, two of which are unreleased (including a rattlingly discordant Groon). The DVD adds audio of the 30th anniversary remaster mix and 10 bonus single, instrumental and alternate takes/mixes, plus a rehearsal. The album proper, meanwhile, and saw a fractured Crimson line-up with Gordon Haskell performing lead vocals on the acoustic quietude of Cadence & Cascade. Greg Lake takes the reins on the eight-minute brassy jazz of Pictures Of A City, showcasing Fripp’s Yes-esque guitar cacophony. The title track is mellotronically juxtaposed with the tricky Cat Food, before The Devil’s Triangle suite, with it’s The Planets-in-a-Hadron Collider motifs.

Islands saw Fripp recruit numerous faces for an album that opens with the 10-minute orchestral Formentera Lady, boasting flute and sax noodling, which reaches frenzied proportions on The Letters. Prelude offers a sweeter interlude, before the 12-minute meander of the title track completes the journey. Bonus cuts include the unissued A Peacemaking Stint Unrolls, while there’s another 30th anniversary DVD remaster, with alternative album of original/alternate takes and edits. Tim Jones
King Crimson

Islands

PANEGYRIC

Welcome CD/DVD reissue; also out again, In The Wake Of Poseidon.

By 1971’s Islands Robert Fripp had recruited drummer Ian Wallace and bassist Boz Burrell (who went on to Bad Company) and free jazzers including pianist Keith Tippett and cornet player Mark Charig. Unsurprisingly, the results were eclectic. Formentera Lady begins with exotic swirls of flute and piano, and its stately closing theme is reworked on Sailor’s Tale, with Fripp’s guitar at its most hair-raisingly jagged. Ladies Of The Road is a spectacularly lubricious funky blues showcasing of Mel Collins’ leering, sexual tenor sax, while Fripp turns in a most un-rock’n’roll solo. It’s followed by Prelude: Song Of The Gulls, an anomalous but beautiful vignette for oboe and strings. This line-up promised great things, but fell apart in 1972.

Mike Barnes
IN THE COURT OF THE CRIMSON KING

Words: Paul Henderson

The debut from King Crimson was not just a groundbreaking masterpiece, it was also the first true progressive rock album.

As the swinging 60s moved through its autumn years, rock music was changing, maturing, and entering a Golden Age that would shimmer with the dazzling luminescence of unprecedented creativity and diversity.

In mid-July 1969 a new British band called King Crimson began recording their debut album. Two weeks later they emerged with a remarkable, groundbreaking record that was sweepingly original, musically inventive, expansive; a true rock classic that many people consider to be the first true progressive rock album. When it was released, The Who’s Pete Townshend called King Crimson’s In The Court Of The Crimson King: An Observation by King Crimson (to give it its full title) “an uncanny masterpiece”. And it was. With much bigger ideas than the budget was able to accommodate, and very limited time, there was no way the album could be pieced together meticulously… even though it sounds like it was. “We went in and essentially recorded the tracks live, and embellished them from there, taking advantage of the multi-tracking – although we only had eight tracks,” multi-instrumentalist Ian McDonald (later to join Foreigner, of all bands) recalls. “We’d record and then go on the road for two or three days, then go back to the studio. I’m surprised by the nonchalance that I see in the diary I kept.”

That the album was completed in two weeks is amazing. That its best-known track, frenetic opener 21st Century Schizoid Man, given its complexity and technical difficulty, was recorded in one take is nothing short of astonishing.

“Contrary to what you might think, Schizoid Man… was actually a breeze compared to other tracks,” says McDonald. But then none of the tracks took long, and everything came together with a speed and smoothness that belies the end result.

“I think the driving force was Ian McDonald, really,” says co-producer/jurist Pete Sinfield. “Ian was the one who wanted to do anything that we could possibly do within the scope and yet still have people listen to it. And I was the one floating around the outside knowing we should have an extraordinary cover without the band’s name on, and stuff like that.”

Perhaps surprisingly, during the making of the album there was little if any feeling within the band that they were producing something special.

“I don’t remember thinking anything like ‘Wow! That’s great’ or whatever,” McDonald says. “Except maybe with… Schizoid Man. I remember listening back to that and thinking: ‘What the hell is this?’”

“When it was all finished there was a sort of glow of satisfaction – and relief,” Sinfield remembers. “There was a feeling of, ‘Gosh, we’ve done something and it sounds really rather good, and we’re quite proud of this bit, and that bit’. By any standards, there are parts of that album that shine out. And I think it has a timelessness to it as well – which I can tell you by the royalty statements even today.”