Lucky is the person who, at work or play, finds a kindred spirit. I was fortunate enough to find one when, reading Eric Tamm’s 1990 book Robert Fripp: From King Crimson to Guitar Craft, I came across this passage about the Red track “Starless”:

“In my opinion, it is simply the best composition that King Crimson ever committed to record. It is also the only King Crimson piece that has ever made me weep.”

Closing my eyes in reverie, I thought: “At last. Someone who understands.”

Robert Fripp was born in 1946, the year of Ethel Merman’s “There’s No Business Like Show Business” and Nat “King” Cole’s “The Christmas Song.” Steven Wilson, as he now sings, “was born in ’67, the year of Sgt. Pepper and Are You Experienced.” Which means that Wilson was in the crib when Fripp began his professional music career. Which also means that, whereas Fripp is now 63, Wilson is only 42.

Yet these two musical spirits are kindred indeed. It was composer/guitarist Fripp who, after debuting with King Crimson in 1969, guided the band from the ’70s to the ’00s. And it was composer/guitarist Wilson who, after first adopting the moniker Porcupine Tree in 1987, recruited an actual band under that name 6 years later and steered it to the point where, today, it’s at the top of its genre. For lack of another name, that genre is still known as progressive rock. Call it what you will, but it’s the modern equivalent of what King Crimson trailblazed 4 decades ago.

Acknowledging the link, Fripp guested on Porcupine Tree’s 2007 album, Fear of a Blank Planet. But there’s something more profound that brings the connection between these two bands, and these two men, literally full circle: surround sound.

After learning the basics of surround from engineer/producer Elliot Scheiner, who did multichannel mixes of Porcupine Tree’s In Absentia (2002) and Deadwing (2005), Wilson went on to make his own surround mixes of Planet and his solo album of earlier this year, Insurgentes. Now, 12 months after the release of Genesis 1970–1975 compelled me to write in this magazine that “it’s getting harder to find something that qualifies as a genuine event” in the realm of music in surround, we get another big one: the reissue of the first three titles in King Crimson’s 40th Anniversary Series, namely In the Court of the Crimson King (1969), Lizard (1970), and Red (1974), released here by DGM/Inner Knot. Each comes in a CD+DVD package whose latter platter is a DVD-Audio disc feature...
ing a 6-channel version — mixed and produced (from the original multitrack master tapes) by Wilson and executive-produced by Fripp. What’s more, Wilson has made a surround mix of Porcupine Tree’s new album, *The Incident* (Roadrunner). A version on standard DVD in DTS 5.1 was included in a mail-order-only Limited Special Edition that sold out even before the regular album was first released in September as a two-CD set. The mix is due to reappear in the next few months on either DVD-Audio or Blu-ray Disc (via the band’s own label, Transmission).

Taken together, these four mixes show Wilson at the top of his surround game. And the three Crimsons prove that Fripp the sonic architect has found someone who truly understands.

Certainly, when you hear the multi-channel mix of Crimson’s 1969 debut, you’ll know that Wilson understands how to enter this Court and magnify this King. He wastes no time in audaciously using the entire surround soundstage: On the opening track, “21st Century Schizoid Man,” Greg Lake’s distorted vocals claw from the center channel as Fripp’s raw guitar chords, starting in the left rear, slash clockwise through the four corners, with each successive punctuation in each successive channel.

Other tracks emphasize atmosphere over movement. The appropriately airy mix of “I Talk to the Wind” envelops you in vocal harmonies that flow from all five main channels. On “Epitaph,” the depth of the cavernous drum hits starting at 4:18 will remind you that DVD-Audio is not just a surround sound format but also a high-resolution one.

By the time of the concluding title track, you’ll revel in the counterpoint of the rear-dwelling mellotron against other keyboard taps in the right front (for the first instrumental break), the flute in back vs. guitar details in the center (for the second break), and especially the slow, calliope-like nudges from over your shoulder (for the third). All the while, the acoustic guitar that enters and reenters the track proves that, far from monolithic, the music of this album is often lithe and luxurious.

Acoustic guitars also figure prominently in the mix of *Lizard* — and if it seems odd that this album is included in the first wave of Crimson reissues in surround, wait ‘til you hear how Wilson has taken this sometimes ultra-busy, verging-on-free-jazz romp and given it the expanded sound field it has always needed. Indeed, this music is now a revelation, from the striking clarity of those acoustic guitars on “Cirkus” to the Frank Zappa-style, all-encompassing improvs in “Happy Family” and the title suite’s “Bolero: The Peacock’s Tale,” where the use of surround sound becomes not just an option but a necessity.

You’ll also dig the details, such as the fine electric-guitar work revealed in the left and right channels of the title suite’s “Prince Rupert Awakes.” And for all of this album’s verve, my favorite surround passage just might be the dirge of “Prince Rupert’s Lament” in “The Battle of Glass Tears.” Led by the wounded march in the front, Fripp’s trademark sustaining-guitar line emanates from the rear — as if from a genuinely distant battlefield — before moving forward, drifting to the right for a slow pan, and then dissolving again far away behind.

Of course, verve and volume are the watchwords of *Red*. That’s “volume” as in loudness and size — and the greatness of both comes through magnificently in Wilson’s surround mix. Right at the start, with the guitar chords of the title track slashing from the center, the single-line guitar figure wailing from the rear, and bassist John Wetton and drummer Bill Bruford slamming all around, Wilson keeps the sound so monumental that it’s nearly, of course, in the red — as if you’re listening right up against these guys in a live room. Later, “Providence” does put you in an actual live Rhode Island room, yet Wilson’s surround mix doesn’t just give you concert ambience; rather, you get (outgoing band member) David Cross’s violin in the two right channels, Fripp in the two lefts, Bruford seemingly everywhere, and Wetton putting on a bass Master Class in the center channel.

*Red* is a perfect album, and if the whole thing wraps up all previous Crimson styles into one package while still breaking new...
ground, then “Starless” is its microcosm. And in surround, you can appreciate this final-track masterwork even more — especially in the ostinato-led midsection, with bass and drums primarily in the left and right front, woodblock in the center (all the way through — who knew?), and that simple but ultimately devastating guitar line in the four corners.

Compared with that and the precise delineation on Court and Lizard, the brash, almost bleeding sonics for parts of “Fallen Angel” and “One More Red Nightmare” may strike you as being a bit too raucous. But this is an intentionally noisy record, and after another listening, you’ll likely marvel at how Wilson is able to balance its power and glory.

Still, I get the feeling that an instrumental version of “Fallen Angel,” mixed by Wilson as a showcase for the basic trio, has been included as a bonus track to highlight the deftness and beauty of the playing underneath the subtracted vocals and horns. It’s still in surround, as are two more bonuses: “A Voyage to the Centre of the Cosmos” and the unedited “Providence” (both previously available only in the live boxed set The Great Deceiver). You also get (in stereo) a revelatory, stripped-down trio mix of the title track.

There are three extra tracks on Lizard (all stereo-only): a runthrough of “Cirkus” with a guide vocal, an alternate version of “Lady of the Dancing Water,” and the remix of “Bolero” from the now deleted boxed set Frame by Frame. And back on Court, there’s a bevy of (stereo) bonuses, including two alternate takes of “I Talk to the Wind,” the isolated backing track for “Epitaph,” and The Alternate Album — a fascinating remix/rethink by Wilson/Fripp, featuring scaled-back instrumental versions of “21st Century Schizoid Man” and the title track. (If that’s not enough Court for your kingdom, there’s a Limited Edition boxed set that adds four more CDs, with further bonuses including a restored bootleg of the band’s watershed July 1969 appearance in Hyde Park, opening for the Rolling Stones.)

Each of these three Crimson reissues also has the album’s original stereo mix — with Court and Lizard adding a new stereo remix by Wilson. Plus you get an expanded, photo-filled booklet that serves up excel-

**RED IS A NOISY RECORD, AND YOU’LL MARVEL AT HOW WILSON IS ABLE TO BALANCE ITS POWER AND GLORY.**

The progressive-metal passages on Porcupine Tree’s The Incident are a direct descendant of the heaviest moments on “Starless” and the rest of Red. In Wilson’s surround sound mix, The Incident begins with the grandeur of decay — as in the decay of a power chord that’s allowed to resonate throughout your listening room. This is “Occam’s Razor,” the first section of the album’s 14-part title suite, and when this song cycle has finished 55 minutes later, it’s clear that Porcupine Tree has succeeded in making its music even more panoramic.

Nothing helps a sonic panorama more than a multichannel mix. And here, since Wilson is mixing in surround something that he has already basically composed in surround, he’s free of any constraints. So whereas he mostly reserves his solo vocals for the center channel, he doesn’t hesitate to put the last ethereal lines of “The Blind House” in the back, or fill all five main channels with the immersive harmonies of “Kneel and Disconnect.” Nor does he blink at placing his lead-guitar breaks on “Drawing the Line” behind you; he can get away with this, since he has already established the entire 360° around you as his territory.

“Time Flies” is Wilson’s big Pink Floyd homage. It begins with rapid acoustic strums in the two left channels and the two rights until, at 3:10, he uncorks some David Gilmour-esque, end-of-Animals-like electric cascades. This leads to the midsection’s reverberating guitar punctuations, which themselves are echoes from the beginning of Floyd’s “Time.” It all makes
for a resounding experience. But even more impressive is how Wilson handles the album’s hardest, densest material. Tracks like “Octane Twisted” and (note the title) “Circle of Manias” ramp up and up, their guitars and percussion pushing at you relentlessly, yet the music never loses its center of gravity. It’s the same sense of order, the same mixing expertise, that Wilson is able to maintain at the climax of Crimson’s “Starless.”

Returning to that track and Eric Tamm’s book: Can “Starless” still bring me to tears? And, for the uninitiated, exactly what are Eric and I talking about anyway? Here’s what: At 11:18 in this 12-minute track, the first theme returns at last, joined shortly thereafter by Wetton and Bruford, who hammer the track home. It’s a conclusion that, as Tamm writes, transforms the song’s early melancholy into tragedy.

Wilson’s surround mix here truly goes for the ocular, wrapping you in that sorrowful theme before opening up a fathomless depth for Wetton’s single-note jabs. The tears that do indeed result, as Tamm explains, are “those tears that tend to issue out of a direct confrontation with what we feebly call ‘artistic greatness’ but is really a portentous and rarely glimpsed secret locked away at the heart of human experience.” Exactly.

I got misty-eyed once more when I played the title section of The Incident for my older son — the first time he had heard high-rez music in surround. He loved it. And when, with my arms waving about, I demonstrated to him the idea of a sound field, he understood.

When the music of one band can be reborn in the music of another, when two artists of different generations can speak the same language, when 40-year-old music in stereo can live anew in surround, when the very concept of the sound of music can still make sense to both young and old . . . well, it’s enough to make a grown man — a grown fan — cry.