The King is not dead! The Editions EG record label has just completed a release of the complete (pre-Warner Brothers) King Crimson catalog. Two previously unavailable discs will make their first US appearance, and, as an extra bonus, the records are being reissued as half-speed mastered audiophile pressings. Here follows a brief overview of the recordings by this pioneering band.

In the Court of the Crimson King — This record, one of the most stunning debuts in the history of pop music, singlehandedly defined the progressive art-rock genre.

From the industrial noise and crashing chords of the opening "21st Century Schizoid Man" to the grandiose coda of the title track, Court is a study in instrumental contrasts, pitting frenetic riffs against chamberlike neo-classical passages. The album is carried by virtuoso performances from Robert Fripp and multi-instrumentalist Ian McDonald. McDonald's contributions are frequently ignored, thus his departure from the group.

In the Wake of Poseidon — While it's to be Fripp's attempt to rework Court in his own image once McDonald left the group. Careful scrutiny, however, reveals tighter song structures, cleaner sound, and more relaxed playing. The disc's chef d'oeuvre, buried at the end of the second side, is "Cat Food," a jazzy vamp that provides a peek at the band's considerable improvisational ability.

Lizard — The jazz from "Cat Food," extended over a full disc, swings a little less, but makes up for it with icy-cool arrangements and clever lyrics, e.g., "Happy Family," a Beatles break-up allegory. Vocalist Gordon Haskell is completely overshadowed by the guest performance from Yes' Jon Anderson on "Prince Rupert Awakes." If only Fripp had become Yes' new guitarist.

Islands — Lacking a distinctive singer and a consistent lineup, Fripp relies on long instrumental workouts. This album contains the last lyric contributions from Peter Sinfield, whose hortatory prose was proving increasingly embarrassing. An often overlooked work, Islands has its moments of brilliance, particularly "Ladies of the Road" and Fripp's solo during "The Sailor's Tale.

Earthbound — Crimson's first live album, never released statewide due to questionable sound quality, is the only album the band should not have released. The sound is indeed atrocious, and the music is the product of a jaded, disillusioned group. It seems on the verge of breaking up. One bit of new material is included: an extended jam on "Groon," the unreleased B-side of "Cat Food."

Larks' Tones in Aspic — After a year's hiatus, Fripp assembled a new band, arguably his best ever, featuring vocalist Court in st John Wetton, ex-Yes drummer Bill Bruford, percussionist Jamie Muir, and violinist/keyboards David Cross. This record marks a change in Crimson's approach, relying almost completely on the ensemble's ability to improvise within loosely defined, extended structures. For the most part the approach works, with "Larks' Tongues in Aspic, Part II" and "Easy Money," but "Talking Drum" shows the formula still in need of work.

Starless and Bible Black — Bruford was out the stack in the wake of Muir's departure, a move which lightened — as well as shortened — the arrangements and playing. Crimson successfully attempts a variety of styles, from the wild "Great Deceiver" to the gentle, live improvisation in "Bali."

Red — Further attrition reduced Crim- son to the essential trio that recorded this swansong, the band's finest moment on vinyl. The record is fueled on pure power: Fripp's furious choral attack, Wetton's muscular singing and bass playing, and Bruford's complex drumming. Instrumental colorizing is added by former band members, including Ian McDonald, who was on the verge of rejoining the band. Unfortunately, Fripp dissolved the band once Red was recorded. King Crimson would be dormant for seven years.

U.S.A. — For its final live performance, King Crimson abandoned all subtlety and turned up the volume, resulting in a Wag- nesian-scaled wall of sound. It took this posthumous release to prove this band could play powerful rock and roll.

The Young Person's Guide to Crimson — The omission of "Easy Money" and "21st Century Schizoid Man" makes this a retrospective rather than a greatest hits compilation. What makes it worth listening is the Fripp-complied booklet of photos and press clippings, the original version of "Groon," and the demo of "I Talk to the Wind," recorded by Crimson was still Giles, Giles and Fripp. Almost all these records are worth owning, but In the Court, Larks' Tongues, and Red remain quintessential Crimson. Long live the King.

David Shaw

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