

**FREEDOM AND CONSTRUCTION: NEW CONCEPTS OF FORM IN THE IMPROVISATIONS AND
COMPOSITIONS OF KING CRIMSON**

By Christopher P. Bohling

Copyright 2012

Submitted to the graduate degree program in Musicology and the Graduate Faculty of the
University of Kansas in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Music.

Chairperson: Roberta Freund Schwartz

Paul Laird

Forrest Pierce

Date Defended: December 11th, 2012

The Thesis Committee for Christopher P. Bohling
certifies that this is the approved version of the following thesis:

**FREEDOM AND CONSTRUCTION: NEW CONCEPTS OF FORM IN THE IMPROVISATIONS AND
COMPOSITIONS OF KING CRIMSON**

Chairperson: Roberta Freund Schwartz

Date Approved: December 11th, 2012

Abstract

This thesis constructs a coherent system of analyses for the improvised and non-improvised music of the progressive rock band King Crimson, with the intention that the methodologies presented here for discussing collective improvisation should be applied to the music of other rock, jazz, and avant-garde groups.

Borrowing methodology from the study of free and postmodern jazz, the thesis develops an analytical system that combines the use of intensity graphs (as developed by John Litweiler and Ingrid Monson) with traditional transcriptions and prose explanations. The intensity graphs are more complex than those created by Monson and Litweiler, as they chart the intensity of multiple instruments that are improvising simultaneously.

The thesis compares the results of the intensity-graph analyses of King Crimson's improvisations with more conventional study of their pre-composed material dating from the years 1969-1974. Over the course of these five years, King Crimson's recordings reveal a growing understanding of the relationship between improvisation and composition, a significant emphasis on rhythm as a unifying factor in both composed and improvised music, and the development of several identifiable post-tonal harmonic styles (associated, respectively, with different members of the band). The recordings also expose the contributions of the band's various short-term members, most notably pianist Keith Tippett and percussionist Jamie Muir.

The analyses in chapters VI and VII clearly link the harmonic language of King Crimson's compositions and that of their improvisations. They also reveal the presence of a leading instrument in most of the band's improvised pieces; as well as demonstrating that most such pieces can be analyzed as a struggle or negotiation between the players, beginning in apparent discord and ending with agreement upon a particular key and tempo. The final chapter then establishes the broad viability of

the analytical method by applying it to the music of Sonic Youth, a more recent group from a considerably different musical tradition than King Crimson.

Acknowledgements

One day when I was a child, I apparently decided to provide my mom with the following bit of advice: “There are three parts to every problem: the first half, the second half, and the third half, which you didn’t know was there.” She wrote it down and attached it to the refrigerator, insisting that I was the creator of this piece of inspired wisdom. I’m pretty sure that it’s actually a quotation from *The Gammage Cup*, but if history one day attributes the saying to me I won’t complain. So, that said, I’d like to thank all those who helped me get through all three halves of this project:

Roberta Freund Schwartz, for advising me and allowing me to write about such a wild topic.

Paul Laird and Forrest Pierce, my committee.

Keith Kahn-Harris, for connecting me with resources in the U.K.

Sid Smith, for writing the incomparably helpful *In the Court of King Crimson*.

My wife and family, for bearing the inevitable long nights hunched over the computer.

Special thanks to Steve Riley, for lending me his impressive collection of King Crimson paraphernalia and recordings, as well as for the gigs and many years of percussion lessons; and also to Bill Bruford for allowing me to make a recording of his forum on improvisation, held at Explorers Percussion in Kansas City in October 2011, complete with his own selected musical examples.

Contents

I.	Introduction.....	1
II.	Methodology.....	6
III.	King Crimson’s Music and History.....	12
IV.	Previous Scholarship.....	30
V.	The Songs.....	32
VI.	The Instrumentals.....	44
VII.	The Improvisations.....	55
VIII.	Beyond 1974.....	70
	Appendices.....	74
	a. Examples for Chapter V.....	74
	b. Examples for Chapter VI.....	80
	c. Examples for Chapter VII.....	87
	Bibliography.....	95

Chapter I: Introduction

The appearance of new and widespread styles of improvised music represents one of the most significant twentieth-century developments of the musical art. The development of recorded sound technology created a shift in focus from the written score to the sound recording as the primary means of musical dissemination, and consequentially allowed for the widespread distribution of single, unique, and possibly improvised performances.¹ Musicians from many different Western musical traditions recognized the potential of this expanding medium, and so, in the first half of the twentieth century, improvised or indeterminate aspects took on new importance in Western popular, folk, and art music.

Improvisation became an important aspect of popular music with the rise of recorded jazz music, particularly in the 1920s and 1930s. In most jazz styles prior to the onset of World War II, improvisation usually took place within a controlled, pre-determined musical context. Typically, the band would open with a statement of a tune or “head” (which may or may not have been borrowed from an earlier source), and then one or more soloists would improvise on the head or the underlying chord. Though most jazz groups concentrated on the improvised aspects of the music, early jazz performance still involved considerable pre-planning and forethought.

However, in the 1930s and 1940s jazz developed to include freer frameworks for improvisation, beginning with the composition harmonically-based heads (as in some bebop and cool jazz) and culminating in the minimization of forethought in the free jazz albums of 1960s musicians such as Ornette Coleman and John Coltrane. Simultaneously, many musicians who emerged from the spheres of academic and Western classical music began exploring new ways of integrating improvisational elements into composed frameworks; notable practitioners of this school of improvisation include John Cage and LaMonte Young. By the mid-1960s, improvisers and experimentalists from many different musical backgrounds frequently collaborated on performance projects, resulting in the development of

¹ See Allan Moore, *Rock: The Primary Text* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1993) 3-29 for a more detailed explanation of this shift.

a pan-musical avant-garde scene that drew equally from the classical tradition, American popular traditions, and non-Western cultures for inspiration. Roger Dean identifies New York City's Fluxus group (including, most notably, Yoko Ono) and the composition school at California's Mills College (including Terry Riley and Pauline Oliveros) as two centers of the avant-garde.²

Though rock music was already a viable genre by the 1960s, rock artists did not adopt aspects of the improvised avant-garde as quickly as jazz or classically-trained musicians. Most early rock 'n' roll groups focused on the production of short, accessible songs that fit into the three-minute framework determined by 45 rpm records and radio formats. Improvisation was typically limited.

However, due to the significant influence of African-American rhythm and blues music on early rock, many rock musicians included improvisation in the form of solos for guitar, piano, or saxophone, which extemporized on the melody or chord changes. Though this method of improvising is analytically identical to that found in the earliest styles of jazz, its role in the composition has been inverted: in most early jazz, the composed head is presented as a preamble or prelude to improvised solos, which occupy the bulk of the piece; however, in early rock music, the solo usually serves as a short break or contrasting middle to a primarily pre-determined song structure.

During the late 1950s and early 1960s, this type of improvisation remained dominant for approximately rock's first decade of existence. However, after 1965, rock bands relied increasingly upon improvised material. The push towards more improvisation came largely from three related rock sub-genres, each of which also contained significant ties with England: blues-rock, acid rock, and progressive rock. Blues rock, as exemplified by groups such as Cream and John Mayall's Bluesbreakers, borrowed the chord structure style and techniques of American blues musicians, and inserted lengthy solos between verses; thus, blues rock songs typically display a format similar to that used in early jazz music.

² Roger Dean, *New Structures in Jazz and Improvised Music Since 1960* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1992), 28.

Acid rock usually features the same ratio of improvisation and composed song, but typically uses less functional chord progressions, which sometimes consist of only two chords.

Progressive rock, which had its birth in the experimentation of the Beatles' *Revolver* and *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, as well as the direct borrow of melodies from classical pieces, practiced most notably by Procul Harum and the Nice. Progressive rock often featured improvisation in both the acid rock and blues rock styles. The genre itself was not defined by improvisation, and there were some progressive rock bands whose music consisted of primarily carefully-composed arrangements with limited freedom for extemporaneous playing.³ Many other groups lumped under the progressive rock umbrella improvised extensively and well outside the standard formats used in acid and blues rock. The group of bands often dubbed the "Canterbury Scene," including Soft Machine, Gong, and Caravan, frequently began their performances with only a loose idea of a motive or tune, and would then improvise for an indeterminate period of time on that theme. The Canterbury bands explicitly acknowledged the structural influence of free jazz artists such as Coltrane and Coleman.

However, the band that took the concept of improvisation to its furthest extreme hailed from not Canterbury but Bournemouth. Formed in 1969, King Crimson quickly gained a critical reputation for their unrelentingly dark compositions and their completely unplanned free improvisations. The group's equal adeptness at pre-composed and spontaneous music ensured them a modicum of success, as they could release both radio-ready vocal tracks such as "21st Century Schizoid Man" and experimental flights of fancy that pleased the avant-garde.

Furthermore, King Crimson expanded the formal structures of rock music. Their composed pieces display an expansion and complication of form, and usually derive their musical tension from what could be called a "confluence of juxtapositions": sections of music are delineated not by their key area, melody, or lyrical content, but rather by their tempo and timbre. King Crimson's improvisations,

³ Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention, Captain Beefheart, and Yes all performed from strictly controlled arrangements.

though initially simple, eventually developed to work along the same principles. Such techniques of juxtaposition and musical development proved very influential in the rock avant-garde, with bands as stylistically distinct as Genesis, Return to Forever, Sonic Youth, Don Caballero, and even Nirvana citing King Crimson as a formative influence on their music.⁴ King Crimson, therefore, can be seen as pioneers of mature progressive rock, but also of jazz rock, noise rock, math rock, and to a lesser extent, grunge music.

While King Crimson's widespread influence alone makes analysis of their compositional and improvisational techniques worthwhile, their music remains noteworthy for additional reasons. First, the band has cycled through numerous full-time, live, and session members in its forty-plus year history, many of whom went to play with other notable acts, such as Earthworks, Talking Heads, Peter Gabriel, Uriah Heep, Asia, Foreigner, and Bad Company.

Most importantly, however, the unclear balance of power within the group (especially during its peak 1972-1974 incarnation) lends King Crimson's early music (both composed and improvised) a sense of variety and musical ecumenicalism that earlier free improvisation often lacks. Though Robert Fripp has been the only consistent member of the group since its inception in 1969, he maintains that he is not the band's "leader."⁵ However, he clearly determines the existence of the band: after 1972, every King Crimson breakup and reunion has been solely Fripp's decision. Longtime Crimson drummer Bill Bruford emphasizes that Fripp is the creative center of the group, and often criticizes the guitarist for being overly moody, picky, and passive-aggressive. At the suggestion that Bruford's drumming played the leading structural role in many of King Crimson's improvisations, the drummer replied that he often felt that he and his fellow rhythm section members were forced to make creative decisions when Fripp would not, only to result in Fripp criticizing the resulting recording after the fact.⁶ Fripp's swings

⁴ Bill Martin, *Avant Rock: Experimental Music from the Beatles to Björk* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing, 2002), 78.

⁵ Eric Tamm, *Robert Fripp: From King Crimson to Guitar Craft* (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1990), 3.

⁶ Bill Bruford, interview by the author, Kansas City, Missouri, October 20th, 2011.

between periods of extreme control and creative involvement and stretches of apparent detachment and disinterest resulted in frequent stark changes in the band's sound, while also forcing the other musicians (most notably Bruford and bassists John Wetton and Tony Levin) to invent new ways of giving dramatic structure to improvisations.⁷ Analyzing these structures, as well as their relationship to the group's personal dynamics and their style of pre-composition, illuminates an important formative chapter in the history of improvisation within rock.

⁷ Gregory Karl, "King Crimson's *Larks' Tongues in Aspic*," in *Progressive Rock Reconsidered*, ed. Kevin Holm-Hudson (New York: Routledge, 2002), 129.

Chapter II: Methodology

Musicological discussion of pop and rock improvisation has increased steadily since “rock musicology” became a viable area of study several decades ago. However, most of the extant methods of describing improvisation cannot be applied successfully to analysis of the free, collective improvisations of King Crimson and their followers. Many scholars treat rock improvisation only in the context of its symbolic function. Edward Macan, among others, deems the improvised rock solo (in the context of 1960s blues rock or psychedelic rock) a “suspension of time.” The improvisation represents the *lack* of forward motion or progress in the music and thus symbolically stands for the overwhelming feeling of a spiritual or hallucinogenic experience.⁸ Robert Walser applies a similar theory to 1980s rock and heavy metal. He argues that the quick, aggressive riffs composed by bands such as Judas Priest represent the crushing, destructive power of various external, impersonal forces, and that improvised guitar solos stand for the individual’s struggle to break free of those restraints.⁹ Both Walser and Jones avoid extensive analysis of the content of the solos themselves; they instead simply note the common use of blues scales and refrain from further comment.¹⁰

In the 1990s scholars began to acknowledge the limitations of such vague symbolic analysis, and attempted to develop methods for discussing rock improvisation in a more theoretical, less sociological manner. Allan Moore’s *Rock: The Primary Text* (1993) established several methodologies that have become popular in recent decades; most notably, he insisted that rock’s “primary text” is the sound recording, rather than the score, and he advanced instead a theory of rock musicology based upon the

⁸ Edward Macan, *Rocking the Classics: English Progressive Rock and the Counterculture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 54.

⁹ Robert Walser, *Running With the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1993), 74.

¹⁰ Blues scales, which developed in the first half of the twentieth century in blues and jazz music, provide the basic template for most mainstream rock and metal improvisation. The typical blues scale consists of the scale degrees 1, b3, 4, b5, 5, and b7. These core pitches work over a wide variety of harmonic patterns and are therefore widely adaptable. Alongside the blues scale, rock players also adapted the technique of bending or modifying notes to make them slightly higher or lower than normal; these are “blue notes.”

comparison of “open” and “closed” chord patterns,¹¹ timbral differences between voices and instruments, and formal structures based upon rhythm rather than tonal (or atonal) pitch hierarchies. Moore adopts the terms “intensional” and “extensional;” he states that intensional music develops from the immediate and changeable whims of the musician, resulting in a spontaneous, improvised performance, while extensional music develops out of some external agent, such as a score. He identifies the importance of intensional, open-ended forms in rock as one of the problems facing traditional musicologists who attempt to address rock styles. He admits some leeway in the interpretation of these terms, preferring to view most rock music as a combination of both intensional and extensional composition.¹² Despite his significant acknowledgement of the validity of intensional performance, the book develops a theory of rock that is nevertheless built upon primarily extensional elements such as pre-set chord patterns and rhythmic variations. He acknowledges the importance of improvisation in rock, but does not give it much attention. His analysis of the free improvisation found in the live version of the Cream track “Spoonful,” from the disc *Wheels of Fire*, exemplifies his method of addressing improvised music:

[In the live version] all three players treat this improvisation as individuals, each moving off on his own flight (this requires no great skill when the whole improvisation is based on a regular quaver and pentatonic E – anything can be made to sound right with literally anything else within these bounds).¹³

In this manner, Moore singles out a pre-composed (extensional) element as the lynchpin around which the rest of the free playing revolves, and treats the constant reiteration of the notes of the E scale as the only significant formal element of the improvisation. As he omits any analysis of the interplay between the various freely-improvised melodies, his methods are not adequate to discuss King Crimson’s collective free improvisations.

¹¹ “Open” patterns are those constructed in such a way that the end of the chord pattern cannot be a satisfying end to the song itself, and therefore lead inexorably into another iteration of the pattern (or a different pattern). Most typically, such progressions end with the V chord. “Closed” patterns typically end with the tonic chord and require no further musical development in order to sound finished.

¹² Allan Moore, *Rock: The Primary Text*, 2nd. Ed. (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2001), 21.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 69.

Elsewhere in his text, Moore does advance several concepts that are relevant to King Crimson's improvisation. Specifically, he notes that rock and jazz improvisers frequently imitate the sounds and styles of instruments other than their own. For example, Moore notes that progressive and psychedelic rock drummers often play long, cyclic patterns that resemble North Indian rhythmic *tals* and rely on repetitions of structures that are longer than one or two measures; he specifically singles out John Bonham as a proponent of this style. King Crimson's improvisations sometimes feature multiple players concurrently presenting "tals" of different lengths. Additionally, Moore claims that many violinists and keyboardists model their solos on rock guitar riffs, and specifically names Crimson's David Cross as an example. Also, Moore reinforces the importance of the congruence of crash cymbals and bass drum with high notes in the melodic instruments, a tendency that is heard in several King Crimson improvisations.¹⁴

Bill Martin's *Avant Rock* (2002) addresses the lack of scholarship regarding free improvisation, and reinforces King Crimson's integral role in its the development, not only by effusively praising the group but also by consciously tying King Crimson's influence to younger artists, such as Sonic Youth, Don Caballero, and Björk. Martin admits that he is by training a philosopher and not a musicologist, so he does not attempt a systematic theory of improvisation, but two of his comments hint at possible musicological methodologies. First, he refers to Jamie Muir's wild and unexpected contributions to *Larks' Tongues in Aspic* as "not the *refusal* of intention, but rather the *disturbance* of intention – a constant spanner in the works" (emphasis in original).¹⁵ Such a "disturbance of intention" can be heard many times in King Crimson's improvisations (even those without Muir) when a player re-interprets the rhythms or pitches of someone else's part in a key or tempo that the original player did not intend. Martin also acknowledges the importance of silence in many of Crimson's improvised tracks. He notes that earlier group improvisations, such as those led by Ornette Coleman, typically feature constant

¹⁴ Ibid., 76

¹⁵ Martin, *Avant Rock*, 147.

sound from the rhythm section, while King Crimson's rhythm players (Wetton and Bruford, in particular) frequently add dynamic contrast and musicality to improvisations through their selective absence.¹⁶

Because the academic establishment accepted jazz as a legitimate area of study somewhat earlier than rock, more resources and methodologies for analyzing improvisation exist in jazz scholarship, and some tactics can be applied with marginal success to the music of King Crimson. Analysis of pre-bop jazz, as described in textbooks by Mark Gridley, Scott DeVeaux, and many others, generally does not translate to King Crimson's music: most use pre-set chord changes and/or a pre-composed tune on which the improvisers base their solos.

Scholars of modern jazz, however, have provided a wealth of analytical tools that can be used to discuss King Crimson's improvisations. The gradual disassociation of improvised content from any pre-composed head or chord progression, as heard in the progression of avant-garde jazz styles of the late 1950s and 1960s, directly presages collective rock improvisation. Therefore, this study will use several analytical techniques derived directly from scholarship on improvisers such as John Coltrane and Ornette Coleman. As standard harmonic and motivic analysis frequently fails to sufficiently explain the extensive solos of this era, jazz scholars developed intensity graphs in an attempt to depict such solos visually.¹⁷ Typically, intensity graphs consist of a single, jagged or curved line, which indicates the intensity of the improvised line, placed above a straight line that marks time through the use of measure numbers or track timestamps. "Intensity" is a somewhat subjective measurement defined by a combination of the tempo, range, and timbre of the musical line and may indicate a reading of the improvisation that contradicts or supersedes one based on traditional concerns such as harmonic or motivic development.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Though Roger Dean, John Litweiler, and Howard Mandel all utilize intensity graphs of varying types, the best explanation of the function of intensity graphs, and that which informs the current description of their use, is found in Ingrid Monson's *Saying Something* (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1996), 139.

Intensity graphs work very well to describe pieces in which a single improviser dominates as in many of the 1960s recordings of John Coltrane. However, they fail to indicate the nuances of group performances. In order to accommodate discussion of group improvisation, Ingrid Monson's *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction* pairs intensity graphs with prose descriptions and transcriptions of jazz improvisations. As her transcriptions usually contain the rhythm section's parts as well as the solo, she can then use them to describe the interaction between the players in conjunction with the intensity of the rhythms and harmonies.

For example, in her discussion of the Jaki Byard Quartet's "Bass-ment Blues," Monson first presents an intensity graph of the solo sections of the piece (excluding the head). She uses the graph to determine the points of greatest structural importance. Then, she describes what musical actions transpire at those points. She discovers that many of the sections of greatest intensity derive from moments of corroboration between two or more players; she specifically singles out several times in which the bass breaks from its timekeeping role and plays countermelodies and responses to the main piano solo.¹⁸ Monson therefore paints a picture of the improvisation that is based on harmonic development, but also takes into account interactive elements of the music.

For the sake of the present discussion, Monson's approach proves fruitful, though it does require some modification. King Crimson's improvisations rarely feature pre-decided keys or harmonic progressions, though they do frequently include recurring motives detached from any specific harmonic content, similar to the "unit structures" favored by avant-garde pianist Cecil Taylor. Therefore, the current study expands Monson's techniques to incorporate more discussion of rhythmic and melodic motives, which she only describes briefly in *Saying Something*.

Because King Crimson's improvisations feature all four (or five) players improvising simultaneously, with no reference to pre-existing parts, mapping the intensity of the improvisation on a

¹⁸ For Monson's analysis of "Bass-ment Blues," see *Saying Something*, pages 138-169.

single line explains the music only partially. The intensity graphs in this study, therefore, frequently feature two separate lines depicting intensity: lines and information above the timestamp line refer to treble parts (the Mellotron¹⁹, guitar, violin, and occasionally percussion) while the information below the timestamp line refers to the actions of the rhythm section (bass and drums).

Furthermore, Monson's analyses typically show that jazz performers (at least outside of the free jazz tradition) typically reach coordinated climaxes at predictable points, such as the beginning of a chorus. In the absence of any chorus structure, King Crimson's collective improvisations often feature "failed cadences" or climaxes in which one or two players attempt to create an important structural moment in the music, but the other players do not follow. Graphs that include multiple intensity lines allow for a visualization of these failed attempts, and also show where all the players come together for moments of structural importance. In conjunction with prose description and indications of important motivic and tonal events, these graphs provide a method for analyzing the development and standard structure of King Crimson's improvisations, and by extension other free rock improvisation as well.

¹⁹ The Mellotron is a keyboard instrument that creates sound by cueing a tape recording to play on a loop.

Chapter III: King Crimson's Music and History

The story of King Crimson began not with their 1969 debut album, but rather in 1967, with the formation of the pop trio Giles, Giles, and Fripp. In August of that year, bassist Peter Giles and his brother, drummer Michael Giles, placed a classified advertisement seeking an organist and singer for a psychedelic pop band. Robert Fripp, who lived close to the Giles brothers in Bournemouth, thought that the band seemed promising and responded, despite the fact that he did not want to sing and did not possess any skill at the keyboard. Fripp impressed the Giles brothers with his considerable cross-picking skill, so the brothers reworked their nascent compositions to incorporate guitar and decided to split vocal duties between themselves.²⁰

After six months of rehearsals, Giles, and Giles, and Fripp released their first album, simply titled *The Cheerful Insanity of Giles, Giles, and Fripp*. As with contemporaneous releases by The Moody Blues and Captain Beefheart, *The Cheerful Insanity* elaborates on the exploratory sonic palette pioneered by the Beatles, but does not achieve the stylistic and formal unity characteristic of later progressive rock. Rather, it feels like a pastiche of the various faces of the psychedelic movement: the tracks "North Meadow" and "Newly-Weds" rely upon acoustic guitars, silly lyrics, and tight vocal harmonies in thirds that resemble those on *The Kinks are the Village Green Preservation Society*. "One in a Million" utilizes thundering, music-hall style piano, much like the Beatles' "When I'm Sixty-Four" and "Lady Madonna." However, two of the tracks point towards King Crimson's style: "Suite No. 1" consists of several discrete sections, each of which features Fripp's playing the melody with piano accompaniment. Though not motivically or formally rigorous, the piece represents Fripp's first attempt at breaking away from verse/chorus form, as well as his first foray into odd meters. The album's closer, "Erudite Eyes," also

²⁰ Sid Smith, *In the Court of King Crimson* (New York: Helter Skelter Publishing, 2002), 27. Cross-picking is a guitar technique in which the guitarist plays both a melody and an accompaniment with a flatpick by quickly alternating between low and high strings, changing the picking direction in order to avoid hitting the strings in between.

presages Crimson's sound, in that it contains a section of free improvisation, though the passage is brief and does not relate to the composed sections of the piece in any way.

Cheerful Insanity flopped, and shortly thereafter, the band attempted to diversify their sonic repertoire by hiring two new members. Saxophonist Ian McDonald, who had previously played with the Giles brothers on the south England club circuit, quickly proved himself adept at both jazz and pop soloing and also immediately began to contribute his own compositions to the group.²¹ McDonald had eschewed the university in favor of the Army, where he played saxophone in one of England's newly-formed army dance bands. Though playing in a big band provided McDonald ample opportunity to develop his technique, he had grown tired of the steady flow of big band music and he hoped that the new group would give him an outlet for musical experimentation. McDonald's then-girlfriend, Judy Dyble, a vocalist for the folk-rock ensemble Fairport Convention, also joined the group. Though the end of her short liaison with McDonald curtailed her involvement with the Giles, Giles, and Fripp, she did record several well-known demo tracks. Most notably, she provided vocals for an early version of McDonald's flower-power ballad "I Talk to the Wind," which later appeared in reworked form on King Crimson's debut album.

In what would become a familiar occurrence throughout King Crimson's forty-year career, Peter Giles soon began to lose interest in the group, both due to his dislike of touring and increasing friction between himself and Fripp. In late 1968, he gave up the life of a musician in favor of a career in electronics and computers. His brother Michael chose to remain with the band. Fripp quickly found a new bassist and vocalist, the then-unknown Greg Lake, but Peter Giles's departure necessitated a group name change. Lyricist and stage manager Pete Sinfield, who began collaborating with Fripp in 1968 and

²¹ McDonald should not be confused with the similarly-named music critic and writer.

quickly became regarded as an “official” non-performing member of the group, suggested the name “King Crimson.”²²

As neither Lake nor Michael Giles had, to that point, significant experience as songwriters or arrangers, Peter Giles’ departure also shifted the balance of creative power within the group. After the name change, Fripp and McDonald provided nearly all of the musical material for King Crimson, with Pete Sinfield conceiving lyrics without the input of the other band members and then giving them to the musicians for setting. McDonald and Fripp further widened the band’s sonic palate by purchasing a Mellotron, which they operated alternately during live performances.²³

With King Crimson now firmly under the control of two non-vocalists,²⁴ the group’s musical direction shifted; Fripp and McDonald favored longer, more complex pieces over the short pop tunes released by the former trio. McDonald also reinforced Fripp’s desire to draw more sonic influence from modern jazz. The pairing of saxophone and guitar provided an expanded range of compositional possibilities. Fripp and McDonald began introducing longer instrumental sections into their pieces: pre-composed interludes, bebop-influenced saxophone solos, and extended moments of free improvisation. Though the Giles, Giles, and Fripp material included several relatively short solos for various instruments, in general the trio limited themselves to improvising within a given key and chord structure; the first compositions bearing the King Crimson name follow similar patterns.²⁵ As McDonald and Fripp gained experience as composers, however, King Crimson’s instrumental breaks grew increasingly detached from the pieces with which they were connected. For example, an early rehearsal

²² Sinfield admittedly intended the name to refer to the devil, but unlike contemporaneous heavy metal bands, such as Black Sabbath, King Crimson never found themselves accused of Satanism or general immorality.

²³ The Mellotron is a keyboard instrument in which the keys are electronically attached to a large bank of reel-to-reel tapes. The keys trigger the tapes to begin playing, allowing for the reproduction of various instrumental sounds (especially string sounds) by a keyboardist. From the early 1960s until the development of advanced digital synthesizers, bands used Mellotrons to simulate string and horn accompaniments.

²⁴ McDonald did provide vocals for later projects, such as the *McDonald and Giles* album with Michael Giles. He never sang in any capacity for King Crimson.

²⁵ Examples of this early improvisational style can be found on the *Epitaph* box set (Discipline Global Mobile DGM9607, 1997).

of “Twenty-First Century Schizoid Man” (which later appeared on their debut album) consists of only a few short verses sandwiched between a slow, minor-mode riff in common time, which resembles the riffs of heavy metal bands such as Black Sabbath.²⁶ Fripp, however, felt that the song seemed incomplete, and chose to insert a contrasting section based on a previously-separate saxophone riff by McDonald. The fast 6/8 riff and subsequent guitar and saxophone solos provide a welcome contrast to the gloomy plodding of the verses.²⁷ The band also began experimenting with lengthy collective improvisations.

After several months of rehearsing, the renamed group first took the stage in April of 1969, and quickly established a considerable following in the London music scene and British musical press. King Crimson surprised many new listeners with their sonic variety, technical prowess, and especially their ability to create freely-improvised stage pieces that sounded both organic and dramatic. By July, word-of-mouth promotion landed the band a highly-coveted slot opening for the Rolling Stones at a free concert in Hyde Park. By some accounts, King Crimson left a greater impression on the 650,000-member crowd than the headlining Stones.²⁸ The band’s popularity skyrocketed after the Hyde Park performance, and their record label, E.G., gave them approval to record and distribute an album.

Due to a quickly-approaching deadline and several malfunctioning 8-track recorders, the band was unable to produce as many discrete tracks as they had planned. The recording session produced only five (somewhat lengthy) songs, which were issued as *In the Court of the Crimson King* in October 1969.²⁹ Critics initially gave the album only conditional praise, especially American critics such as Lester

²⁶ These prototypical heavy metal riffs typically rely upon the pentatonic minor scale, emphasize the downbeat (rather than the backbeat, as in other rock), and are played in a low register.

²⁷ Smith, *In the Court...*, 87.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 101.

²⁹ Most of the album’s tracks have subtitles. For example, the album sleeve lists the first song as “Twenty-First Century Schizoid Man (including Mirrors).” The band added the subtitles in post-production in order to conform to a label mandate that required them to meet a minimum number of tracks for the album to be marketed as a full-length; the titles do not refer to actual sections within the songs.

Bangs and Robert Christgau, who generally found the music more pompous than rock ought to be.³⁰ Nevertheless, American listeners purchased the album in droves, so E.G. booked the band for a two-month tour of the United States.

During the tour, tensions between Fripp and the other band members quickly arose. Fripp developed the somewhat notorious habit of practicing scales and arpeggios in his hotel room before and after concerts rather than socializing with his band mates.³¹ The problems escalated when he began composing new songs in between tour dates and presenting them to the group at rehearsals. McDonald, in particular, disliked the heavier, more abrasive tone of Fripp's new material. When the tour reached its final leg McDonald and Giles approached Fripp about their latent creative differences. According to Fripp, he initially offered to leave, in order to preserve most of the group's line-up; however, McDonald insisted that King Crimson had become "more [Fripp] than me," so McDonald and Giles both quit the band upon their return to England in December of 1969. Soon after, Greg Lake abandoned the group as well, choosing to join his friend Keith Emerson and form the more commercially viable Emerson, Lake, and Palmer.³²

Fripp, therefore, found himself with an unfulfilled record contract, a band name, and no band. In spite of the circumstances, he chose to re-assemble King Crimson and record a second album. Pressured to produce on short notice, Fripp attempted to convince his former band mates to return for the session. Michael Giles and Greg Lake agreed to sign on as studio sidemen only; McDonald, however, refused to help, and was replaced by former Cirkus saxophonist Mel Collins, who became the only new "official" member of the group. Fripp also re-hired Peter Giles (as Lake could only spare enough time to record vocals) and avant-garde pianist Keith Tippett. Fripp offered Peter Giles and Tippett full

³⁰ Robert Christgau, review of *In the Court of the Crimson King*, <http://www.robertchristgau.com/get_artist.php?id=748&name=King+Crimson>, (January 5, 2012).

³¹ Tamm, *Robert Fripp*, 124.

³² *Ibid*, 54.

membership in the group but both declined, feeling that committing to the unstable group was too risky.³³

Fripp titled the resulting album *In the Wake of Poseidon*. While reviewers generally acknowledged that the record contained several compelling pieces, especially the ballad “Cadence and Cascade,” they also rightly criticized it for being dangerously similar to the group’s debut. Like *In the Court...*, the album contains five songs, and several sound like rewrites of tunes from the first album. Most notably, the opener, “Pictures of a City,” displays the same formal structure and blues-rock influence as “Twenty-First Century Schizoid Man”; “Cadence and Cascade” contains similar chord progressions and melodic contours to “I Talk to the Wind”; and the improvisational/tape collage hodgepodge “The Devil’s Triangle” directly recalls the textures of “Moonchild.”

Despite mixed reviews, *In the Wake of Poseidon* sold well enough to justify the continued existence of the band.³⁴ Unfortunately, with the departure of the session musicians King Crimson now consisted of only Fripp and Mel Collins. For the next 18 months, the now-established pattern of arrivals and departures continued, with multiple drummers, bassists, and vocalists joining and quitting King Crimson in quick succession. Though unable to retain players long enough to tour, Fripp managed to record and release two more albums, the jazz-oriented *Lizard* and the ambient, spacious *Islands*. The releases were met with indifferent reviews and declining sales, as the listening public grew impatient for the sort of incendiary concerts that had brought the group to fame in 1969.³⁵

In early 1972, Fripp finally assembled a version of King Crimson that held together long enough to book a tour, and Fripp and Collins hit the road alongside drummer Ian Wallace and bassist/vocalist (and future Bad Company frontman) Boz Burrell. In an effort to invigorate the band’s live performances,

³³ Smith, 89.

³⁴ Tamm, 72.

³⁵ Smith, 102.

Fripp attempted to re-introduce collective improvisation into the band's musical language. However, Fripp and the other members again disagreed over the structure of the improvisations. Burrell, Collins, and Wallace, all fans of the emerging American funk scene, wanted to incorporate soul-based rhythms and scales into King Crimson;³⁶ Fripp, alternatively, wished to introduce more elements from modern art music, such as atonality, unconventional meters, and non-harmonic improvisation. Wallace recalls at least one gig at which he, Collins, and Burrell started playing a 12-bar blues progression, only for Fripp to refuse to play at all, sitting glumly with his guitar at his side. Predictably, the band disintegrated once again at the end of the tour, and the post-split live album *Earthbound* demonstrates why. Recorded at several Midwestern American venues, the disc contained three composed tracks and two lengthy improvisations, "Peoria" and "Earthbound." Both display the band audibly pulling apart: Burrell, Wallace, and Collins's lines often coalesce into a recognizable blues or jazz chord progression, which Fripp then disintegrates by playing outside the tonality or rhythmic structure. The resulting, disjunct nature of the improvisations, combined with the recording's poor sound quality, caused *Earthbound* to fare poorly in both critical response and international sales. To listeners and journalists, King Crimson appeared (again) to have reached the end of its musical life.

Despite rapidly waning interest from both critics and fans, Fripp quickly discovered that musicians still wanted to participate in his King Crimson project.³⁷ Setting out to re-build King Crimson for the fourth time, the guitarist first contacted avant-garde percussionist Jamie Muir about joining the group. Muir reported that he had attended and enjoyed several of King Crimson's early concerts in 1969, and immediately agreed to play in the new version of the band. Like McDonald and Collins before him, Muir came to King Crimson from a non-rock career: he made his first commercial breakthrough

³⁶ Notably, several tracks on *Earthbound* feature Burrell utilizing the extended ninth and thirteenth chords often found in the music of groups such as Sly and the Family Stone; as well as the slower, more complex sixteen-beat-to-the-bar rhythms typical of 1970s soul.

³⁷ Robert Partridge, "An Interview with Robert Fripp," in *Melody Maker*, October 5th, 1974, 22-24.

playing alongside improvisational guitarist Derek Bailey,³⁸ and in several interviews he expressed his fascination with the experimental performance art and aleatoric music of avant-garde classical musicians like John Cage and LaMonte Young.³⁹ During his performing career, Muir typically avoided playing the trap set, preferring xylophones, shakers, thumb pianos, sheets of metal, and found objects such as car parts and balloons. Muir refused to change his instrumental setup for the sake of reinforcing King Crimson's status as a "rock" band, and thus his contributions frequently pulled the band's music towards the realm of avant-garde art music.

Fripp still wanted King Crimson to maintain some connection to rock music, and knew that sounding "like a rock band" would sometimes require the use of the standard, trap-set oriented "rock beat," with its characteristic bass drum hits on beats one and three and snare drum accents on two and four. To that end, he offered membership to the talented young set player Bill Bruford, who at that time was the drummer for the chart-topping progressive rock group Yes. To the shock of many in the music industry, Bruford left Yes, which was then reaching the pinnacle of its popularity and commercial success, to join the supposedly unstable King Crimson. Even decades later, so many fans and interviewers still interrogated Bruford about leaving Yes that he felt compelled to devote an entire chapter of his 2009 autobiography to answering them. He reveals that he asked Fripp to allow him to join King Crimson in 1969 after attending several of the band's concerts and feeling a strong affinity for their music and philosophical attitudes. Fripp, however, countered that the young drummer was talented but still too raw and aggressive to play with Crimson.⁴⁰ Bruford seemingly got the last laugh, as Crimson quickly fell into disarray and Yes rocketed to superstardom. However, during the months in which Yes recorded their hit 1972 album *Close to the Edge*, Bruford grew musically restless, later reporting that he no longer believed that he was improving as a musician and worried that he would

³⁸ Bailey has been associated with free jazz, but he always eschewed the term, and also disliked calling his music "rock."

³⁹ Smith, 110.

⁴⁰ Bill Bruford, *The Autobiography* (London: Jawbone Press, 2009), 37.

simply re-hash his performance on that album for the rest of his career.⁴¹ Therefore, when Fripp contacted him and let him know that he was “ready” for King Crimson, Bruford accepted the job without hesitation.

Having assembled a formidable percussive barrage, Fripp then searched for a vocalist, bassist, and second melodic instrument to complement his guitar playing. He found the first two in John Wetton, a relative unknown who had spent several years on the London blues and hard rock club circuit but had no experience with progressive rock or as a lead singer.⁴² King Crimson’s previous singers had all been essentially tenors, so Wetton’s deeper baritone voice lent the group’s new music a harsher and darker edge.

Instead of adding another woodwind player like McDonald or Collins, Fripp opted to hire the classical violinist David Cross, hoping to re-invigorate his own creativity through the incorporation of new timbres into the band.⁴³ Cross had very little experience with either rock or avant-garde music, and he would later complain that he felt he was sometimes at a creative disadvantage in the processes of improvisation and group composition. Nevertheless, his violin and viola playing became a staple sound on the group’s next three albums.⁴⁴

As lyricist Pete Sinfield had also departed with the rest of the *Islands* band in 1972, Fripp was forced to find a new way to provide the band with words. Of the new band members, only Muir felt comfortable proposing lyrics to the group, but the other musicians felt that his poetry did not match up to the high standard previously set by Sinfield. (Muir himself later characterized his own work as “Gothic rubbish.”) Fripp tasked Wetton, as the singer, with the job of discovering lyrics. Rather than

⁴¹ Ibid., 43.

⁴² Kim Dancha, *My Own Time: The Authorized Biography of John Wetton*, (Schnecksville, PA: Northern Line, 1997), 38.

⁴³ Smith, 111.

⁴⁴ Sheila Speier, “Interview with David Cross,” in *Circus Raves*, September 1974. Retrieved from <http://www.elephant-talk.com/wiki/Interview_with_David_Cross_in_Circus-Raves>, January 3rd, 2012. Elephant-talk.com is the official newsletter/wiki of King Crimson and is maintained with the approval and guidance of the band members.

attempting to pen the words himself, Wetton outsourced the duty to his childhood friend Richard Palmer-James, who was also a notable member of the band Supertramp. Unlike Pete Sinfield, Palmer-James decided not to travel with the band or take an “official” position within the group, and most of his communication with the group came via the post rather than in person. In general, his lyrics are more sarcastic, direct, and vitriolic than Sinfield’s, which tend towards the fantastic. The members of King Crimson felt that this shift away from classic progressive rock themes was well-suited to their new, less bombastic style.⁴⁵

Like the original 1969 lineup, the new five-piece group engaged in a long tour before attempting to make any recordings. Like the tour with the *Islands* band, this series of concerts featured collective improvisation. This time, however, Fripp encountered little resistance to his rhythmic and (a)tonal experimentations, primarily because he had personally selected his new band mates based on their willingness to follow his improvisational lead. Furthermore, because the other musicians’ idiosyncrasies already complemented Fripp’s own, the new members soon learned that they were able to make significant musical contributions, and Fripp discovered that he did not need to impose his will on his fellow players as much as he had during previous incarnations of King Crimson.⁴⁶ Muir, in particular, continued to blaze his own improvisational path, and his increasingly wild stage antics, manner of dress, and ametric playing style provided a perfect visual and aural foil to Fripp, who tended (and still does, to this day) to sit unmoving at the side of the stage and play in short, calculated bursts. Muir’s violent treatment of his “instruments” (which included more kitchen utensils and woodcutting tools than actual drums) rivaled that of the Who’s Keith Moon and soon became a considerable source of on-stage excitement, for both the audiences and the other band members. Fripp recalls an incident in which

⁴⁵ Smith, 158.

⁴⁶ Tamm, 97.

Muir became so animated that he began throwing chains across the stage, nearly hitting Fripp's head in the process.⁴⁷

The tour resulted in an outpouring of positive response from both fans and critics to a degree that King Crimson had not experienced since 1969. Shows sold out much more quickly than on previous tours, and music publications lavished unqualified praise on the ensemble: *New Musical Express* gushed over the band's "unparalleled spiritual impact" and *Melody Maker* described their performance as a "barrage of phenomenal creativity."⁴⁸

Immediately following the tour, the band recorded their fifth album, *Lark's Tongues in Aspic*, which was completed in the winter of 1973. As with *In the Court of the Crimson King*, much of the instrumental music was derived from improvisations that the band had performed while on tour. In particular, the many novel instrumental combinations heard in "Lark's Tongues in Aspic, Part One" (mbira and glockenspiel, Mellotron and bass, and autoharp and violin, for example) were chosen by the group specifically because those combinations had produced particularly surprising effects on stage.

Despite their timbral diversity, previous Crimson albums had consisted primarily of vocal pieces, which usually employ relatively straightforward forms.⁴⁹ The few instrumental pieces scattered throughout their early releases sound like aural collages, either because they are loose collective improvisations or because they were spliced together in the studio from pre-recorded or computer-generated bits. Starting with *Lark's Tongues*, both the vocal and instrumental tracks grew more complex. Most of the songs released by this new version of King Crimson expand beyond simple song forms, and the non-improvised instrumentals unfold according to clear melodic and harmonic plans. The two halves of the title track to *Lark's Tongues...*, which bookend the album, reveal the band's new

⁴⁷ Smith, 163.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 163.

⁴⁹ Many rock songs of the 1960s and 1970s tend to use either strophic or verse/chorus forms.

formal concept: the first half consists of a lengthy, quasi-symphonic suite of related sections, frequently featuring new and novel combinations of instruments, while the material the second half derives from linear, polyphonic elaborations and improvisations upon a single, modal riff.⁵⁰ The other instrumental track on the album represents the band's first attempt at a more "structured" group improvisation; while "Moonchild," from the debut album, includes little more than pointillistic, unplanned spurts of notes, the recording of *Larks' Tongues' "The Talking Drum"* clearly involved some pre-planning. A drum/bass ostinato that emerges about halfway through the improvisation was composed in advance, but the other three instrumentalists improvise freely, finding sporadic points of tonal and rhythmic unity.⁵¹

The album's vocal pieces also represent significant advancements in compositional technique. Only "Book of Saturday" is in a "standard" song form (in this case, strophic form). The ballad "Exiles" utilizes stanzas in AABA form, but lengthy and varied violin interludes distort the listeners' sense of the form beyond recognition. The bluesy "Easy Money" derives its structure primarily from the juxtaposition of a 7/8 melody with a 4/4 riff.

Upon completion of the recording, the group immediately returned to the road, attempting to maintain the high level of group chemistry and creativity of their previous tour. However, Crimson's streak of bad luck again reared its ugly head on February 10, 1973, when Jamie Muir abruptly quit the band following a gig. At the time, label management told the other band members that Muir had dropped a heavy gong on his foot, rendering him unable to perform. However, he later admitted that his real reason for leaving was quite different: he had experienced a spiritual crisis and felt compelled to devote the rest of his life to various forms of mysticism. To facilitate spiritual growth, he retreated from

⁵⁰ Further discussion of the structure of "Larks' Tongues in Aspic" can be found in Chapter VI.

⁵¹ Smith, 169.

the music scene, and has given very few interviews and only appeared on one limited-circulation recording since his departure from King Crimson.

Bruford, Fripp, Wetton, and Cross decided they had no choice but to carry on as a four-piece ensemble. Their tour schedule prevented a break for auditions, so the band moved forward, with Bruford attempting to cover Muir's most important parts. The group remained on the road for the entirety of 1973, stopping only for a short vacation in mid-summer. For several reasons, the band incorporated far more free improvisation into their sets during the 1973 tours. Fripp generally opposed the performance of material by the previous versions of King Crimson, despite Wetton's desire to sing "Cadence and Cascade" and "Epitaph" in concert; only the 1971 non-album single "Cat Food" found its way onto the 1973 set lists.⁵² Fripp's rule effectively limited the group to material from *Larks' Tongues in Aspic* and new compositions, which the band did not have time to write while rehearsing and touring. Additionally, the band struggled to convincingly perform the album's longest track, "Larks' Tongues Part One," without Muir's balloon and autoharp contributions.

The band members recall becoming increasingly tired and frustrated with being forced to improvise constantly. Bruford, in particular, missed working alongside Jamie Muir, who he felt had provided a "safety net" during improvisations: Muir not only provided a visual distraction during weak moments, but having two drummers also allowed both to experiment with less rhythmic playing, freed from the strictures of providing a constant pulse.⁵³ Fripp also later commented that he felt that the improvisations failed to launch as often as they became compelling.⁵⁴

Thankfully, for the sake of posterity, sound engineer George Chkiantz recorded every date of the second 1973 tour. After circulating for years in bootleg form, many of these recordings were issued

⁵² Smith, 175.

⁵³ Bruford, 124.

⁵⁴ Tamm, 51.

during the last decade in mastered format by Fripp's private record label, Discipline Global Mobile. New critical evaluation of the performances belies the band members' negative attitudes about their free improvisation. Sid Smith, author of the most complete history of King Crimson, refers to the 1973 soundboard recordings as "fresh...but often turbulent journeys of discovery."⁵⁵ The tapes showcase the band's quickly-expanding ability to craft meaningful musical forms in completely improvised settings. Audiences reacted with wild enthusiasm, especially when the group erupted into a single, unified groove or key after several minutes of free and often atonal searching. King Crimson's improvisational prowess also began to attract the attention of notable jazz musicians, with figures such as Herbie Hancock professing themselves fans of the group.⁵⁶

Facing pressure from label management to release new material by early 1974, the group decided to include several of the most successful tour improvisations on their next album, *Starless and Bible Black*. The tracks fall into distinct categories more easily than those of its predecessor: there are three vocal pieces (none of which employ standard song forms), four free improvisations, and one "composed" instrumental piece, "Fracture." Like "Larks' Tongues in Aspic, Part Two," Fripp composed "Fracture" alone, whilst the other tracks on the album were written collectively. Similarities between the two "solo Fripp" tracks abound: both utilize a single consistent guitar timbre, which is highly distorted and reminiscent of heavy metal; both begin with a single, repeated motive, which is then developed and expanded continuously; and both frequently include Phrygian and Lydian modes as well as whole-tone scales, which indicate the influence of Bartók.⁵⁷ Many of King Crimson's later albums also feature at least one track in this style.

The improvisations, which represent more than half of *Starless and Bible Black's* running time, display as much variety as the composed tunes. In "We'll Let You Know" and "The Mincer," Bruford and

⁵⁵ Smith, 173.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Fripp himself referred to "Larks' Tongues Part Two" as "what Hendrix might sound like playing Bartók;" see Smith, 160.

Wetton maintain steady tempos, begin within a specific tonality and later deviate from it, only to return to the same tonal area at the end. "Trio" and the title track are slower but create more musical tension through their tonal schemes: both begin with each band member exploring separate (or even multiple) tonal regions before gradually building rhythmic tension and eventually coalescing into a single key, which had not been planned in advance. Improvisations that follow this format are particularly fascinating, as they seem to represent an aural glimpse into the creative mechanics of the band. Through the process of "key-searching," as it might be called, King Crimson created a musical analogue for the act of group composition. Each musician can be heard testing out his own ideas and key areas, finding points of convergence with one or more of the others, and eventually agreeing upon a key, groove, and affect.⁵⁸ The delicate "Trio," illustrates this technique of key seeking very well, especially because it does not include percussion. In what would become a famous decision, Bruford chose not to play at all during that particular improvisation. Fripp felt that Bruford's non-participation was essential to the success of the piece; when creating the liner notes for the album he listed Bruford as a writer of the track, crediting the drummer for providing "admirable restraint."⁵⁹

While *Starless and Bible Black* received as much critical admiration as its predecessor, during the ensuing tour tensions within the band resurfaced.⁶⁰ Specifically, Bruford and Wetton's contributions to the improvisations became increasingly loud and violent, much to the chagrin of violinist David Cross, whose playing was frequently lost in the mix, despite his use of the best sound equipment available. Consequentially, Cross resigned himself to playing his secondary instrument, the Mellotron, during the improvisations. The other members of King Crimson noticed his increasing detachment and lack of involvement in the group's creative processes, and eventually asked Cross to leave in June of 1974.⁶¹

⁵⁸ The process of improvisation is discussed more thoroughly in Chapter VII.

⁵⁹ Robert Fripp, liner notes to *A Young Person's Guide to King Crimson* (E.G. EGKC-10, 1976).

⁶⁰ Fripp, liner notes to *Starless and Bible Black* (Island ILPS9275, 1974).

⁶¹ Tamm, 162.

Though Cross departed without a fight, his absence forced Fripp to consider alternative options for melody instruments. As the band regrouped as a trio to record a new album, eventually titled *Red*, the remaining musicians decided to invite a bevy of guest artists to join them for the sessions. Fripp drafted cornetist Marc Charig, oboist Robin Miller, and former members Mel Collins and Ian McDonald to play on the album; David Cross was also listed as a guest artist on an improvisational track that had been recorded on the previous tour.

The inclusion of the horns lends *Red* a jazz influence that had not been heard on King Crimson albums since *Lizard*. Two of the vocal tracks (“Fallen Angel” and “One More Red Nightmare”) directly recall the style of “Twenty-First Century Schizoid Man,” consisting of straightforward verses with long stretches of harmonically-driven improvisation. The album also contains two instrumentals, the Fripp solo composition “Red” (which continues the style of “Fracture”) and the free improvisation “Providence.”

However, the disc’s closing track, “Starless,” attracted the most critical attention upon release, as it represents a compilation of all of the styles explored by King Crimson since the inception of the group. The piece opens with a three-verse song crooned by Wetton over a Mellotron backing, an instrument that had not been used in King Crimson’s music since the *Islands* album. The song gives way to a modal riff in 13/8, which is repeated at successively higher pitches; this corresponds to the “Fripp solo” style of “Larks’ Tongues Part 2” and “Fracture.” When the transposed riff reaches its highest pitch, the horn players join the primary trio in an explosion of frantic free improvisation. The use of several recurring motives gives the piece unity, and despite the distinct sections the piece is one of King Crimson’s most compelling and successful works. As a whole, *Red* presents the best balance of improvisation and pre-composition found on the band’s first seven albums.

After the extremely successful *Red* sessions, Bruford and Wetton were eager to resume touring. The band even discussed reinstating McDonald as a full member, hoping to fill the void left by Cross's departure. However, negotiations and tour plans stretched out over several months, and in September of 1974 Fripp stunned Bruford, Wetton, and McDonald by announcing his wish to withdraw from King Crimson and the professional music scene in general. He later justified his decision in several ways. First, he had grown increasingly frustrated with the music business, specifically taking issue with the increasing interference of label executives in matters such as concert booking, artistic direction, and, most significantly, the distribution and copyright of the songs themselves. Fripp wished to develop a different business model in which the artists themselves held total control over their recordings, and felt that he could not do so while devoting all of his energies to performance. Furthermore, like many musicians, he had become tired of constant touring. Unbeknownst to his band mates, Fripp had undergone a spiritual awakening not unlike that of Jamie Muir several years earlier. In June 1974, Fripp read several essays and pamphlets by the Russian mystic G.I. Gurdjieff and his British devotee J.G. Bennett. Fripp recalls that, upon first pondering the implications of Bennett's philosophies, "...the top of my head blew off. I knew that I had to go to [Bennett's school] in Sherborne."⁶²

Fripp suggested that McDonald take his place as the melody instrument in the group, since he could play guitar and saxophone equally well. However, label executives quickly nixed the idea, refusing to consider a King Crimson lineup without Fripp, tacitly confirming that King Crimson was "Robert's band." King Crimson, therefore, "ceased to exist," as Fripp stated in a press release.⁶³

The other members of the group reacted with varying degrees of anger. Bruford and Wetton expressed their displeasure publicly, but later admitted that Fripp was probably right to break up the band before the group lost its spark. McDonald felt personally insulted, believing that Fripp's decision

⁶² Smith, 201.

⁶³ Ibid, 202.

to end the group on the eve of his reinstatement as a full member was an act of revenge for his departure in 1969. Nevertheless, the careers of all three musicians recovered quickly; Bruford later joined Genesis, the supergroup U.K., and participated in various jazz projects. Wetton, also a member of U.K., played with Uriah Heep for a time before forming the pop-rock band Asia, and McDonald became a founding member of Foreigner. With the exception of some of Bruford's jazz-fusion experiments, none of these groups developed King Crimson's highly avant-garde style.

After several years in seclusion with J.G. Bennett, Fripp gradually re-entered the music business. He relocated to New York, recorded minimalist guitar tracks with the ambient music composer Brian Eno, and appeared alongside New Wave artists such as David Bowie, Blondie, and David Byrne. He eventually reformed King Crimson in 1980 with Bill Bruford and two American musicians: the well-respected session bassist Tony Levin and Talking Heads guitarist Adrian Belew, who also assumed vocal duties. This new edition of the band established a very different musical niche than the original King Crimson, focusing on minimalist textures, New Wave electronic timbres, and a sense of collective rhythm influenced by Javanese gamelan. After a ten-year hiatus, the band became active again in the 1990s with the construction of a "double trio" setup consisting of two drummers, two bass instruments, and two guitarists, and explored antiphonal composition and spatial effects. The band changed styles again in the 2000s, adopting a leaner, heavy metal-influenced sound. The group has not released any new material since 2003, but has toured as recently as 2009.

While each edition of the band is notable in its own right, these later versions of King Crimson utilized a very different sense of composition and musical development, and influenced a different group of followers. Therefore, the music of post-1974 King Crimson will not be discussed at length. However, inquiry into the musical procedures represented in the work of King Crimson after 1974 and its subsequent influence may prove as rewarding as investigation of the 1970s recordings.

Chapter IV: Previous Scholarship

Though the majority of scholarly writing about progressive rock has focused on the genre's most prototypical and commercially successful groups, a small group of music writers have devoted articles and books to the band's work.⁶⁴ With the exception of Sid Smith's "band biography" *In the Court of King Crimson*, all extant writings emphasize the importance of the band's non-improvised songs and largely ignored the improvised material. Eric Tamm's biography of Robert Fripp (1990) represents an early attempt to apply musicological or theoretical analysis to any of King Crimson's music, though the author only discusses two tracks at length, "Larks' Tongues in Aspic Part One" and "Starless." Tamm claims that both can be described using classical sonata form, though he only details the formal outline for the former piece.⁶⁵ Edward Macan's 1997 text *Rocking the Classics: English Progressive Rock and the Counterculture*, the first large-scale examination of progressive rock as a whole, accepts Tamm's analysis of the two pieces. Macan discusses King Crimson only sporadically, and his sole significant addition to Tamm's analysis is his identification of large-scale motivic transformations in some King Crimson instrumental pieces, most notably the Mel Collins-era tunes "Groom" and "Lizard."⁶⁶

Gregory Karl's 2002 article "King Crimson's *Larks' Tongues in Aspic*: A Case of Convergent Evolution" includes a far more comprehensive analysis of King Crimson's early style. Karl questions Tamm's reading of "Lark's Tongues Part 1" as a sonata form.⁶⁷ He also comments upon the relationship between lyrics and music in King Crimson's songs, noting that most of the group's early works feature stories about an individual who is struggling against others or society, and that the music often depicts this conflict through extreme shifts in dynamics and tempo. Unfortunately, Karl ignores the free improvisations, but his concept of representing struggle musically can be applied to them, as they often

⁶⁴ Most writing on progressive rock centers on the bands Yes, Genesis, Emerson, Lake, & Palmer, and to a lesser extent, Pink Floyd (whose status as a "progressive" band is invariably discussed).

⁶⁵ Tamm, 167.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 45.

⁶⁷ Karl, 119.

feature the players “fighting” against one another for control of the aural space before finally “compromising” on a key (see Chapter VII).

Despite its omissions, Karl’s article stands as the most convincing analysis of the music of King Crimson’s first period.⁶⁸ Other recent writings, such as Brian Robison’s “Somebody is Digging My Bones: King Crimson’s ‘Dinosaur’ and the Post-Progressive Hierarchy,” Bill Martin’s chapter on King Crimson in his book *Avant Rock*, and Paul Hegarty’s *Before and Beyond* all concentrate on the band’s post-1980 material and add little to the discussion of their style of the 1970s. Therefore, my analysis will utilize Karl’s analytic tools to discuss the “composed” music of the first period, and in Chapter VII will extend some of those same tools and methods, along with techniques of jazz analysis, to explain more clearly the structures of the free improvisations.

Though a biographical rather than analytical text, Sid Smith’s *In the Court of King Crimson* (2001) provides the most comprehensive account of the band’s history. As an associate of Robert Fripp and his production company (Discipline Global Mobile), Smith was able to uncover previously unknown information and interviews regarding the compositional processes of Crimson’s best songs. Smith does not attempt to draw in-depth connections between the comments of the participants and the songs themselves, so his text represents more a collection of commentaries than scholarly analyses. Nevertheless, the book contains a large amount of primary source information not found anywhere else.

⁶⁸ That is, 1969-1974.

Chapter V: The Songs

Tracks from King Crimson's early period can be broadly divided into three categories: songs, pre-composed instrumental pieces, and free improvisations.⁶⁹ Further dividing the vocal tracks into sub-categories is difficult and probably unnecessary, as nearly all of the band's early songs display unique approaches to form.⁷⁰ Most also represent conflict or individual struggle, in the sense described by Karl, through musical means. Generally, the band's approach to establishing musical drama grew more sophisticated during the 1969-1972 period. The group's mastery of composition reached its apex during the 1972-1974 period, especially with the tracks "Larks' Tongues in Aspic, Part 1," "Fracture," and "Starless."

The first method of musical conflict explored by King Crimson involves a split time arrangement – that is, two distinct tempi within a single song. Their debut single, "Twenty-First Century Schizoid Man," begins with a verse in C minor, with Greg Lake screaming the melody at the top of his range. The bleak lyrics vaguely describe the alienation of an individual who feels constantly battered by evil and destructive forces he cannot control, but who also lusts after luxuries he does not really need, thereby hastening his own demise:

*Cat's foot iron claw
Neuro-surgeons scream for more
At paranoia's poison door.
Twenty-first century schizoid man.*

*Blood rack barbed wire
Politicians' funeral pyre
Innocents raped with napalm fire*

⁶⁹ For the purposes of this text, "free improvisation" refers to sections of music in which no musical decisions have been made beforehand. Improvisation in which the player bases his choices on a pre-chosen chord progression or key area will be labeled "harmonic improvisation." Such generic boundaries are of course not rigid, as the band frequently interpolated sections of free improvisation into otherwise-pre-composed pieces. The group's pre-composed instrumentals (such as "Fracture") often include sections of harmonic improvisation.

⁷⁰ The tracks on *In the Wake of Poseidon* that directly mirror their counterparts from *In the Court of the Crimson King* are the only exceptions to this rule.

Twenty-first century schizoid man.

*Death seed blind man's greed
Poets' starving children bleed
Nothing he's got he really needs
Twenty-first century schizoid man.⁷¹*

The two primary riffs in the song are related, as both begin on C and outline an octave centered around C. However, the first (henceforth “Riff A”) is set in a slow common time, while the other, “Riff B,” occurs in the faster 6/8 bridge. Riff A consists of a unison diatonic ascent to the dominant, G (though the full chord is omitted) before dropping down a ninth and climbing chromatically back to G. Though the riff does return to the tonic at the beginning of the next phrase, its immediate return to G destroys any sense of finality, instead imbuing the riff with a relentless forward motion (Ex. V-1). The slow tempo, along with a drum rhythm that emphasizes the same accents, could be interpreted as the confidence and unity of the evil forces besetting the subject. The first three lines of the vocal melody have no clear pitch due to their high register and the electronic distortion applied to Greg Lake’s voice; however, his screaming lies roughly around the pitch G4. In the fourth line, which serves as a refrain, Lake sings an a cappella cadential figure that moves from B-flat to C. However, the relentless riff returns, preventing the cadence from creating any sense of closure.

After the second verse, the second half of the riff is repeated several times before bursting forth into the contrasting middle section. The allegro B section in 6/8 consists of two sub-sections, one consisting of many repetitions of Riff B, and the other of lengthy guitar and saxophone solos. Like Riff A, Riff B begins on C and outlines a fifth above and below the starting pitch, though it has been adapted to the new meter and includes more syncopation (Ex. V-2). The drummer plays cross-accent against the riff, rather than emphasizing its rhythm, as in the verse. The harmonies and timbres remain the same.

⁷¹ Liner notes, *In the Court of the Crimson King*.

The addition of jazz-influenced solos produces a polyphonic texture, but the most significant difference remains the tempo and meter shift.⁷² Listeners could perhaps interpret the blinding speed of the solo section as the chaos encountered by the subject as he tries to control the world around him, but the actual explanation for the quick tempo is probably simpler: the band wanted to show off their technical abilities. Fripp recalls each of the members suggesting particular elements to add to the song in order to showcase their particular instrument.⁷³ “Twenty-First Century Schizoid Man” set the precedent for the lengthy technical diversions of many later progressive rock bands, but unlike their followers, King Crimson avoided the trap of technicality for technicality’s sake in this case, as the quick 6/8 bridge adds significantly to the power of the lyrics.

The group returned to the technique of contrasting tempi for several vocal numbers on *Starless and Bible Black*, “Lament” and “The Night Watch.” The lyrics of the former discuss a familiar rock topic – the travails of fame – and separate the song into two distinct sections. The first utilizes a leisurely tempo that would be calming were it not for Fripp’s insistent rootless chords, which continually change mode and avoid implying any particular key (though the bass eventually supplies an F# tonic) (Ex. V-3). John Wetton’s vocal line is similarly chromatic, and rises in pitch with each of Fripp’s modulations. The first several verses describe the fame and attention lavished upon rock stars in seemingly positive terms, but the restless harmonic motion that underscores them reveals the sarcasm of the words.

After the second verse, the song enters a transition in $\frac{3}{4}$ time, which is dominated by the juxtaposition of a guitar riff consisting of an ascending series of half-steps (which inset polyrhythmically against the bass and drums). After the transition, two more verses follow, which utilize the same pattern of chromatic ascent found in the first half of the song but proceed at twice the pace. Also, the

⁷² The elements of the solos that most directly recall jazz include the use of extended techniques (such as overblowing) and the separation of the solo sections into distinct choruses. McDonald and Fripp each play 10 times through the changes. Also, the soloists both begin and end their solos emphasizing the tonic triad (C minor), but explore distant tonalities (such as the key of the lowered fifth) in the middle of their solos.

⁷³ Smith, 59.

accompaniment changes to a distorted guitar ostinato that crawls quickly down and up the chromatic scale (Ex. V-4). Frequent grand pauses interrupt the momentum, rendering it less exciting than the corresponding section in “Twenty-First Century Schizoid Man.” Additionally, the section’s aggressive timbre serves no obvious purpose with regard to the emotional content of the lyrics. Nevertheless, the band generates considerable interest on a purely musical level due to the development of increasingly complex themes over a single harmonic pattern.

“The Night Watch” represents King Crimson’s most compelling use of contrasting tempi prior to their 1974 masterpiece “Starless.” Based upon the famous painting by Rembrandt, the song’s lyrics represent two different, but related, situations: the outer verses describe the painting at a distance, from the point of view of a modern observer.⁷⁴ The middle two verses describe the role of the artist and the soldiers in society during Rembrandt’s era. Though perhaps a bit gimmicky, the lyrics are probably the most evocative that Richard Palmer-James contributed to the band.

*Shine, shine, the light of good works shine
The watch before the city gates depicted in their prime
That golden light all grimy now
Three hundred years have passed
The worthy Captain and his squad of troopers standing fast*

*The artist knew their faces well
The husbands of his lady friends
His creditors and councillors
In armour bright, the merchant men*

*Official moments of the guild
In poses keen from bygone days
The city fathers frozen there
Upon the canvas dark with age.*

The band chose to set the “frame” verses in a nearly ambient manner, with Wetton delivering an arrhythmic melody over a wash of sustained notes and constantly varying timbres. The static nature of the accompaniment comments musically upon the immobile characters in the painting. After the first

⁷⁴ Smith, 173.

verse, the tempo increases to moderato and the guitar enters with a simple but insistent arpeggiated figure. Wetton's vocals are unusually disjunct, but remain consonant with the guitar. The return to slow, sustained chords for the final verse gives the listener a sense of returning to the present, and identifying again with the viewer of the painting.

All three of the vocal pieces on the band's final 1970s album, *Red*, contain distinct sections based upon tempo and meter changes; two follow the same basic pattern established by "Twenty-First Century Schizoid Man" and "Pictures of a City." Both "Fallen Angel" and "One More Red Nightmare" consist of moderate-tempo vocal verses alternating with slow, triple-meter bridges that include long horn solos. In "Fallen Angel," the bridge serves a programmatic purpose with regard to the lyrics. The verses describe the early life of lyricist Richard Palmer-James, but the reverie is interrupted by the stabbing of the narrator's brother. At this point, the meter shifts to 6/8 and a distorted guitar repeats a dreary flat-VI-V progression (Ex. V-5).

This progression repeats incessantly, but does not resolve, creating musical tension that had been absent during the verses. After several iterations, guest cornetist Marc Charig enters with a muted solo, broken into short, minimalistic phrases (Ex. V-6). The timbre and contour of many of the phrases create the impression of sobbing.

In contrast, the similar bridge section of "One More Red Nightmare" carries no clear emotional connection to the verses, though they do feature fine saxophone playing. The final track on *Red*, entitled "Starless," also utilizes structural tempo changes, but as it serves as a compendium of all of the band's techniques it will be discussed below, along with "Larks' Tongues in Aspic, Part One."

During their first four years of existence, the band also developed methods for creating expressive musical conflict through the use of polymeter. Though not utilized extensively on their first two albums, a hint of polymeter does appear at the end of the bridge of "Twenty-First Century Schizoid

Man;” in order to effect a smooth retransition to the slower 4/4 tempo of the verse, the guitar and saxophone play a unison arpeggio that implies a 6/8 meter twice as fast as the tactus of the common-time verse.

The Latin-jazz influenced *Lizard* and *Islands* contain several instances of the technique, though only briefly in the instrumental numbers “Bolero,” “Last Skirmish,” and “A Sailor’s Tale.” The polymetric sections found on *Lizard* result from the superposition of themes that had previously been presented separately. For example, “Last Skirmish” (a movement of the “Lizard” suite) ends with a combination of several themes that clearly represent opposing forces in a battle. The polymetricism that results cannot be considered a basic structural element of the piece.

By contrast, for *Larks’ Tongues in Aspic* and *Starless and Bible Black* King Crimson created songs that rely on polymeter to define song structure. “Easy Money” (from *Larks’ Tongues in Aspic*) begins with a rather dull common time riff. The guitar and bass alternate blandly between the tonic and lowered seventh scale degree, while the drums heavily accent the second and fourth beats. However, after the introduction the vocals enter with a melody that ends and begins again a half-beat earlier than the riff, therefore creating the impression of 7/8 (Ex. V-7). As the verse progresses, the vocal entrances move several beats ahead of the iterations of the riff. The short refrain at the end of each verse corresponds to neither meter.

The pervasive metrical dissonance programmatically illustrates the bitterly anti-commercial sentiment of the lyrics:

Your admirers in the street

Got to hoot and stamp their feet

In the heat from your physique

As you twinkle by in moccasin sneakers

*And I thought my heart would break
 When you doubled up the stake
 With your fingers all a-shake
 You could never tell a winner from a snake
 Easy money.*

The lyrics skewer rich celebrities in general and may also allude to politics. However, the song can also be viewed as directed at mainstream rock stars. In this interpretation, the “simple” opening riff becomes a parody of commercial rock, and the discomfort created by the polymeter directly undermines the “obvious” nature of the riff. Cross’s violin and Muir’s percussion arsenal slowly enter, cutting across the meter independent of the vocal line and creating a dense mass of sound that features both polymeter (as the 4/4 riff and 7/8 melody continue) and cross-rhythm (due to Muir and Cross’s improvised additions). Against the exciting metric elaboration, the opening riff sounds staid and awkward.

“Easy Money” proved a fan favorite, especially during live performance, where the polyrhythmic excursions frequently became even more complicated than those on the studio version.⁷⁵ Though King Crimson would not explore polymetricism to the same extent as in “Easy Money” until their 1980 reformation, the band did return to the technique in a more controlled manner for the first track on *Starless and Bible Black*, “The Great Deceiver.” The song opens with a unison 4/4 melody (that Sid Smith claims is extremely derivative of John McLaughlin⁷⁶), but the bulk of the track proceeds polymetrically. After the unison introduction, the bass continues alone with a five-note chromatic riff, with the notes placed far enough apart as to obscure the position of the downbeat and the sense of metrical stress (Ex. V-8a). The voice enters with a line that implies 6/8, sharing the same eighth note pulse as the bass but

⁷⁵ The multiple versions of the track found on the box set *The Great Deceiver* reveal a wide variety of elaborative possibilities.

⁷⁶ Smith, 206.

emphasizing a different downbeat (Ex. V-8b). Finally, the drums enter, accenting a pattern that is aurally interpreted as $\frac{3}{4}$ against the voice's 6/8 (Ex. V-8c)

Like "Easy Money," the lyrics for "The Great Deceiver" critique modern materialism and the perceived shallowness of English culture, though the anger is not directed as specifically as in the earlier song:

Health food faggot with a bartered bride

Likes to comb his hair with a dipper ride

Once had a friend with a cloven foot

Once he called the tune in a checkered suit

Great Deceiver

In the door on the floor in a paper bag

There's a shoe-shine boy with a gin-shop slag

She raised him up and she called him son

And she canonized the ground that he walked upon

Great Deceiver

Cigarettes, ice cream, figurines of the Virgin Mary⁷⁷

The polymetric progression described above reinforces the bizarre and nonsensical images of the verses, while during the two refrains ("Great Deceiver" and "Cigarettes...") the band dispenses with polymeter; however, the scansion of the text constantly shifts and cuts against the new $\frac{3}{4}$ meter (Ex. V-9).

⁷⁷ In this case the word "faggot" was intended as a reference to the British meatball dish. Lyricist Richard Palmer-James claims that the use of the word as a sexual slur was not common in England at the time and did not occur to him until many years later. The "Cigarettes, ice cream, figurines of the Virgin Mary" line was written by Fripp, rather than Palmer-James, and refers to items found in the Vatican gift shop; see Smith, *In the Court*, 224.

The third method of musical organization employed by King Crimson in their vocal pieces involves insertion of collective improvisation into a pre-set song structure. The inclusion of both techniques under a single title first appears on the track “Moonchild” from their debut album; the song consists of three short strophes followed by nearly ten minutes of free improvisation. However, the improvisation begins only after the song reaches a full stop, and the two “halves” display no significant musical relationship. Therefore, the “Moonchild” improvisation can be best treated as a separate piece and will be analyzed in chapter VII.

Fusions of improvised and non-improvised sections do not appear on *In the Wake of Poseidon*, but *Lizard*, while containing no truly “free” improvisation, begins to point in that direction. The track “Indoor Games” presents composed and collectively improvised music simultaneously. The song follows a basic verse/chorus form, with the bass, drum, and vocal parts remaining the same in each verse. Several horn players improvise simultaneous counter-melodies to the vocal line, which frequently clash harmonically.

In the case of “Indoor Games,” the improvisation merely embellishes the established structure of the song. King Crimson’s fourth album, *Islands*, contains several tracks in which free improvisation alternates with composed sections, thus fulfilling an essential structural role. For the album’s first track, “Formentera Lady,” the band broke from their tradition of beginning each album with a loud, hard rock song, instead opting to open the disc with a lengthy, quiet reverie that sets the tone for the generally soothing affect of the album.⁷⁸ “Formentera Lady” begins with a nearly three-minute improvisation, which cannot be said to be entirely free as the key center of E is clearly established in advance; E also serves as the dominant of the song’s primary key of A major, so the improvisation can be heard as an extended prolongation of the dominant.

⁷⁸ Several authors abuse the word “bucolic” when describing this album. See Smith, *In the Court*, 172 and Tamm, *Fripp*, 84.

The double-bass begins the improvisation alone, presenting a theme that resembles both the melody of the initial vocal entrance and the main melody of the vocal line. The top notes of the bass's double stops are identical to the verse melody, while the stops' lower notes resemble an inversion of the song's main theme; see ex. V-10 a. and b. The bass embellishes this theme several times, after which flute and piano enter and all three instrumentalists begin playing quick arpeggios and scales based around E minor. After about 110 seconds of instrumental improvisation, the verse, which describes beachside life, is introduced:

*Houses iced in whitewash guard a pale shoreline
 Cornered by the cactus and the pine.
 Here I wander where sweet sage and strange herbs grow
 Down a sun-baked crumpled stony road.*

The bass, piano, and violin continue their sweeping arpeggios, suggesting the sounds of the waves breaking upon the shore. After the verse, however, the band strikes up a more structured Latin groove (see Ex. V-10b). At this point, the lyrics shift from describing the empty seaside to discussing the town's inhabitants. Along with the more rhythmically active, non-improvised accompaniment, the lyrics suggest that the protagonist has moved away from the seashore and into a more populated area of the town. Therefore, "Formentera Lady" represents the band's first use of improvisation for clear lyrical and programmatic reasons.

Free improvisation appears again on the same album in "The Letters," a rather maudlin lyric documenting the vicious exchange between a wife and her husband's lover. The pre-composed sections of the song are based on an earlier Crimson tune, "Drop In," that was originally written in 1969 and never released on a studio album. The song begins and ends with vocal sections, featuring whispery

singing from Boz Burrell accompanied by dreary, overwrought guitar arpeggios.⁷⁹ Saxophonist Mel Collins fills out the track's length with an explosive saxophone solo that alternates between a blues-influenced riff in F minor and free improvisation. Though a few other instruments eventually join Collins, he controls the pace and register of the improvisation. The solo, while departing harmonically from the previous F minor, is melodically based, and mapping the solo onto an intensity graph produces results that recall Ingrid Monson's graphs of John Coltrane (ex. V-11). Though fiery, Collins's solo fits poorly with the rest of the song and does not clearly relate to the lyrics, so the track is considerably less successful than "Formentera Lady."

The Wetton/Bruford version of King Crimson mixed free improvisation with vocal pieces less frequently than previous editions of the band, but they did release one song utilizing the technique that arguably surpassed all of the band's previous attempts at such a combination. "Exiles," from *Larks' Tongues in Aspic*, incorporates electronics, improvisation, and composed verses more smoothly than either track from *Islands*. The piece begins with a slow accumulation of indistinct, generally high-pitched electronic noises. About one minute into the track a low rumble grows audible, the timbre initially sounding quite similar to the preceding electronic sounds. However, as it grows louder it becomes identifiable as Mellotron and low-pitched viola. Drums and other ambient noises swirl around the Mellotron, which emphasizes the pitch B, the dominant of the eventual tonic, E. The drums and viola seamlessly shift into a slightly quicker tempo; the viola ceases to improvise and instead previews the melody of the verse before the voice enters (Ex. V-12).

During the last line of the verse, the low Mellotron chords reappear, segueing into a second section of free improvisation. This time, the viola occupies a higher register, as violist David Cross elaborates on motives from the verse. At the end of the improvisation, the viola retransitions into the

⁷⁹ In retrospect, most of the members admitted to disliking "The Letters;" see Smith, *In the Court...*, 173.

main theme, as before. The song then proceeds with a second verse, bridge, and a final verse, resulting in a rough AABA form, with improvisational sections inserted before the first two “A” sections. The inclusion of improvisation at such specific points in the form underscores the journey described in the lyrics. In the first verse, the narrator describes becoming lost in a foreign and unfamiliar place:

*Now in this faraway land
Strange that the palms of my hands
Should be damp with expectancy*

The improvisations that bookend this verse create a sense of musical uncertainty and unfamiliarity, paralleling the sentiment of the narrator. Then, as the improvisation gradually gives way to pre-planned harmonies and melodies, the narrator shifts to discussing his homeland in the final verse:

*My home was a place by the sand
Cliffs and a military band
Blew an air of normality.*

Though not particularly subtle, King Crimson’s formal equivocation of improvisation with the “foreign land” and composed music with the “homeland” deepens the emotional impact of “Exiles.” In addition, they are handled more smoothly than in “Formentera Lady,” which features complete breaks between sections. Therefore, “Exiles” represents the band’s most satisfying and unified incorporation of improvisation into composed vocal pieces. In fact, with the exception of *Red’s* “Starless,” none of the vocal pieces found on the two subsequent albums match “Exiles” in terms of formal innovation.

Chapter VI: The Instrumentals

King Crimson's instrumental compositions of the 1969-1974 period divide into two groups more easily than do the songs. About half were composed by the group(s) collectively, while Fripp wrote the others alone. At first, both the "Fripp-composed" and "group-composed" pieces sounded similar, utilizing episodic structure, shifting timbres, and little formal repetition. Over the course of five years, the "group-composed" pieces became more infused with improvisation, more rhythmically complex, and also more formally rigorous. Fripp's solo compositions also developed, as he began to create formal structures based upon a certain rhythm rather than a melody or harmonic progression. Unlike the group compositions, Fripp's own works tend to feature elaboration of a single riff, rather than relying upon alternation between several distinct sections. The guitarist also reduced the timbral variety of his music, with most of his compositions from the Bruford/Wetton era relying upon constant, overdriven electric guitar timbre, with the other instruments occupying decidedly secondary roles.

In the Wake of Poseidon features "The Devil's Triangle," which is credited on record to Fripp and Ian McDonald, but it is primarily a re-orchestration and electronic manipulation of Holst's "Mars;" McDonald was no longer in the group when the track was assembled, so the piece can be rightly said to have been constructed primarily by Fripp. Though most of the structure of "The Devil's Triangle" was derived from Holst's composition, the track contains an inner section (5:30-7:00) that does not correspond to any part of "Mars." During this minute and a half, loud electronic sounds engulf and eventually overwhelm the keyboards, drums, and bass. Such "sonic obliterations" of main themes appears numerous times in later Crimson instrumentals. Nevertheless, the constantly-shifting electronic timbres and lack of formal repetition mark "The Devil's Triangle" as a product of King Crimson's earliest months.

Creating “The Devil’s Triangle” clearly had a lasting impact on Fripp’s compositional practices. Over the next five years, several aspects of the band’s developing style can be tied directly to elements of “Mars.” For example, rhythmic ostinatos on a single pitch, similar to the famous opening to Holst’s piece, appear in “Cirkus,” “Easy Money,” “Larks’ Tongues in Aspic, Part 1,” and “Starless.” Repetition of a short melody at different pitch levels, as heard frequently in Bruford/Wetton era classics such as “Fracture” and “Red,” can also be related to “Mars’s” ominous main theme,⁸⁰ which Holst sets in several different keys throughout his piece.

Lizard, by contrast, presented the “Lizard Suite,” the band’s longest unified non-improvised work. It contains both instrumental and vocal subsections; the two songs (“Prince Rupert Awakes” and “Dawn Song”) do not depart from standard pop song forms. The liner notes credit the three instrumental pieces to Fripp alone, though this is misleading: each of the numbers begins with a melody written by Fripp, followed by several minutes of improvised elaboration on that melody by various guest musicians.⁸¹ None of the themes return verbatim once they have been stated, and the textures and timbres constantly fluctuate.

Overall, the “Lizard” instrumentals create musical tension by progressing from simple homophony (at the beginning of the second section, “Bolero”) to chaotic polyphony (during the climactic “Last Skirmish”). “Lizard” displays no clear organizing principle other than what Hector Berlioz referred to as “the law of crescendo;” the music begins serenely and ends chaotically.⁸² Nevertheless, the piece represents the first occurrence of improvised elaboration on a theme in King Crimson’s catalogue. Though Keith Tippett’s jazz musicians brought the concept to the group, Fripp and his band continued to utilize it well after his collaboration with Tippett had ended.

⁸⁰ That is, the brass melody that enters above the ostinato.

⁸¹ Smith, *In the Court...*, 118.

⁸² David Cairns, *Berlioz: Volume Two: Servitude and Greatness, 1832-1869* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 203.

Therefore, some of the developments in Fripp's compositional style can be explained through his experience with the music of Holst as well as his observation of Tippett's group during the recording of *Lizard*. His compositional ability did not reach its apex until the trio of "Fripp solo" pieces found on the Bruford/Wetton era albums, but "Prelude: Song of the Gulls," from *Islands* does display a marked refinement of technique in comparison to the instrumentals from previous albums. Unlike "Lizard," "Song of the Gulls" contains no improvisation at all. Fripp scored the piece for orchestral strings alone, conducting a group of session players for the recording.⁸³ The piece utilizes a waltz rhythm and a straightforward ABA form. It begins with a sweeping E major melody, accompanied by pizzicato arpeggios in the lower strings (Ex. VI-1a).

The B section moves to the relative minor and contains bowed string accompaniment rather than pizzicato. However, the general shape of the melody remains the same, and the end of the phrase in particular contains several motives that refer back to the A theme (Ex. VI-1b). The tight-knit melodic construction of "Song of the Gulls" reveals Fripp's nascent ability to craft large-scale dramatic works around the manipulation of basic ideas and themes.

Combining his penchant for dissonance (as displayed in "The Devil's Triangle") with his newfound knowledge of thematic development, during the 1973-1974 tours Fripp constructed three solo masterpieces that came to represent his definitive compositional voice. "Larks' Tongues in Aspic, Part 2," "Fracture," and "Red" appear on three different albums and were written over the course of more than a year, but all rely upon similar formal principles and can be seen as a coherent sub-set within Fripp's larger catalogue. All three are based around non-diatonic scales. Specifically, the main themes of "Larks' Tongues in Aspic, Part 2" and "Fracture" are derived from the octatonic scale, while the primary riff in "Red" echoes the whole tone scale. Additionally, all three pieces consist formally of

⁸³ He later admitted that his "conducting" was probably terrible and that he was almost certain that one of the violinists was subtly cueing the rest of the ensemble; see Smith, *In the Court...*, 198.

two main themes which are first stated independently and then elaborated upon in a polyrhythmic or polymetric fashion. In each case, the two themes are motivically related.

The main theme of “Larks’ Tongues in Aspic, Part 2” divides evenly into two halves, the first of which contains no melodic or harmonic motion but includes aggressive syncopation (Ex. VI-2a). The second half of the theme utilizes a straight, constant eighth-note rhythm, but actually presents a melody (Ex. VI-2b). The second theme combines the syncopation of the first half of the main theme with the shape and many of the same prominent pitches as the octatonic melody (Ex. VI-3).

During the repeat of the second theme, Muir and Bruford assume command, moving from a timekeeping role to the primary focus of musical interest by incorporating higher-pitched drums and keyboard instruments and ignoring the backbeat. Muir adds a third level of melodic complexity to the piece by comically inflating and squeezing a series of differently-sized balloons. Rhythmically, Muir and Bruford fill nearly every sixteenth note of every bar with squeals, cymbal crashes, and other high-pitched sounds. Cross joins in at 3:28 with improvised scales and arpeggios in the middle register. Collectively, Cross, Bruford, and Muir fill all possible musical space. Therefore, “Larks’ Tongues in Aspic, Part 2” gradually increases in intensity from the simple, homophonic opening of the main theme to the overwhelming impact of musical saturation.

Fripp’s other two solo pieces reveal the same formal outline. The two themes of “Fracture” are similarly related, as its first theme consists of a succession of arpeggiated octatonic chords in even sixteenth notes (Ex. VI-4a). The second “theme” consists of a simple, thrice-repeated riff (Ex. VI-4b) that is derived from a whole-tone scale. The riff repeats twice, moving a major third higher each time and therefore outlines the entire whole-tone scale.

As the two themes repeat, David Cross begins an improvisational elaboration on the main theme, eventually overwhelming the rest of the band with the volume and velocity of his playing. The

section of his solo from 5:38 to 6:30 frequently utilizes a two-bar theme that outlines the same whole-tone shape as the B theme (Ex. VI-5).

“Red” follows an identical trajectory from spare statement to aggressive saturation, but in the absence of Muir and Cross, Fripp must create the sonic density with his guitar alone. Nevertheless, the piece shares the blunt impact of “Fracture” and “Larks’ Tongues in Aspic, Part 2.”

Fripp composed the majority of the group’s instrumentals, especially for the albums *In the Wake of Poseidon*, *Lizard*, and *Islands*, during which the band’s membership was in constant flux. However, the more vocal members of the 1973/1974 lineups, especially Bill Bruford and Jamie Muir, involved themselves in the composition process, resulting in pieces that fused Fripp’s idiosyncratic style with various outside influences. The first and by far most significant of these is “Larks’ Tongues in Aspic, Part One,” from the album of the same name, which represents King Crimson at their most eclectic. More critical scholarship has been produced about “Larks’ Tongues, Part One” alone than about the remainder of King Crimson’s catalogue; specifically, scholars dispute the relevance of classical sonata form to the piece.

It opens with a cyclic mbira ostinato (played by Muir) in 7/8 time (Ex. VI-6). The ostinato implies the key of D, but it is pentatonic and does not traverse the entire scale. Bruford distorts the metric regularity with various quiet taps on woodblocks, finger cymbals, and small drums. The limited range of the mbira ostinato deliberately avoids implying any melodic direction, causing the section to sound like an introduction rather than a main theme. After three minutes, Cross enters with a double-stopped melodic theme in 5/4 (Ex. VI-7) that originally implies C minor but eventually descends to cadence in G minor as Fripp joins with emphatic long tones. The cadence elides directly into a homophonic riff in 7/4 (Ex. VI-8). These two themes repeat before the quick octatonic guitar riff (that will later be heard as the second half of the main theme of part 2) enters. This cues a lengthy section of free improvisation that

proceeds at approximately twice the pace of the previous riff. Some of the improvised lines, particularly in the bass, contain figures that relate to the two opening themes (Ex. VI-9).

After several minutes of improvising the piece grinds to a halt, and the violin re-emerges alongside an autoharp (played by Muir). Muir and Cross embark on a unison duet that utilizes the pentatonic scale of the introduction. Then, Cross proceeds alone with a disjunct double-stopped solo, featuring many short phrases and long pauses. The solo gradually morphs from the pentatonic of the unison theme to the minor of the original violin melody, which suddenly re-emerges at the 11:23 mark. This functions as a recapitulation of sorts, and both opening themes repeat before the piece reaches a cadence on G, which is reinforced by an extended coda. In its combination of improvisation, delicate melodic passages, octatonic themes, and heavily distorted guitar, “Larks’ Tongues” incorporates all of King Crimson’s previous compositional tricks into one surprisingly well-unified musical journey.

The formal scheme of the piece invites several theoretical readings. Fripp biographer Eric Tamm views the opening percussion ostinato of “Larks’ Tongues” as a slow introduction, and then refers to the 5/4 violin melody that follows (at 2:53) as a main theme, and finally calls the subsequent 7/4 guitar riff (at 3:40) the secondary theme. The two themes do repeat, corresponding to sonata form. Tamm then refers to the long stretch of the piece from 5:00 – 11:23 as a development, in spite of its clear division into six distinct sections. The main theme does return at 11:23, and cadences on G. “Larks’ Tongues in Aspic, Part 2” reinforces this reading, and, as it contains several motives originally found in Part 1, Tamm claims Part 2 relates to Part 1 as the finale of a Romantic symphony might relate to the sonata-form first movement.⁸⁴

Gregory Karl prefers to hear “Larks’ Tongues Part 1” as an extension of pop song form rather than as a planned sonata form. He notes that none of the members of King Crimson underwent

⁸⁴ Tamm, 167.

rigorous training in music theory, unlike other major progressive songwriters such as Keith Emerson and Rick Wakeman. Karl argues, therefore, that the “sonata-like” structure of “Larks’ Tongues Part 1” developed from the gradual expansion of the standard verse/chorus/bridge adaptation of pop song form. Most rock songs in this form feature a verse and chorus, which then repeat before giving way to a contrasting bridge and concluding with a last statement of the chorus. Karl demonstrates that many of King Crimson’s early songs employ this form, and further shows that King Crimson greatly expanded the importance and scope of the bridge section over the course of their first four albums. “Twenty-First Century Schizoid Man,” from their debut album, features extended saxophone and guitar solos at this point in the form, which contrast rhythmically, though emotionally, with the music of the verses. “Pictures of a City,” from Crimson’s second album, utilizes a similar form, but adds a slow, contrasting interlude between the bridge solos and the final statement of the chorus, rendering its form essentially ABAB(bridge)(interlude). Karl argues that “Lark’s Tongues Part 1” essentially follows this same form, with the addition of a slow introduction, a greatly expanded “interlude” (which takes on the character of a development; due to the removal of vocals, the piece unintentionally resembles classical sonata form.⁸⁵ Given the imbalance in the length of the sections, and the band members’ general lack of training, Karl’s reading is contextually accurate.

“Starless,” the final track on *Red*, surpasses “Larks’ Tongues in Aspic, Part 1” in its comprehensiveness because it includes vocals. Tamm once again attempts to define the piece as a sonata form; perhaps more accurately this time, as the middle portion of “Starless” contains only two closely-related sections, rather than six. However, Karl’s “expanded pop song form” also fits reasonably well, as the statements of the main theme twice at the beginning of the piece and once again at the end create a modified AABA structure. In this case, however, the addition of a clear coda makes sonata form the more useful and accurate reading.

⁸⁵ Karl, 125.

The earliest bits of the piece that would become “Starless” emerged in 1973, when Wetton scrawled a short three-stanza poem and a chord progression during a touring break. He presented this strophic song to the band with the title “Starless and Bible Black.” At the time Fripp and Bruford felt that the song was too simple and did not match King Crimson’s current aesthetic; however, they liked the title and the chord progression. Therefore, an unnamed improvised track that contained a similar progression was christened “Starless and Bible Black” and later became the title track of their next release. Wetton held on to his rudimentary song nonetheless, and presented it again in early 1974, as the band struggled to develop new material. This time, his band mates reacted more favorably, and they decided to expand the piece by adding a riff in 13/8 to the end of the verses. In order to provide musical closure, the group appended an instrumental version of the verse to the end of the composition.⁸⁶

The band recorded this “first version,” which features David Cross playing most of the lead melodies on violin, several times live. However, Cross departed the group before they could make a studio recording. For the *Red* sessions, therefore, Fripp hired three horn players in Cross’s stead. The additional instrumentation thickens the texture in several places and also gives the song a much wider dramatic range. Notably, the six musicians do not play together until the final three minutes of the piece, and the horn players participate in several new sections of group improvisation.

The piece divides broadly into three large portions, which traverse a wide array of textures and styles: the opening strophic song; the octatonic, riff-based “development” in 13/8; and the return of the previous themes. More significantly, each section recalls a separate era in the band’s early history. The strophic verses, accompanied by a string-cued Mellotron, recall “Epitaph” and “In the Wake of Poseidon” from King Crimson’s first two releases. The central development resembles “Fripp solo”

⁸⁶ Smith, 207.

pieces such as “Fracture” because of its repetition, chromaticism, and constantly shifting tonic.⁸⁷ The collective improvisation at the end of the development contains elements of the lengthy improvisations found on *Starless and Bible Black*, and the massed horns which restate the two verse themes resurrect the orchestral soundscapes of *Lizard* and *Islands*.

Though such a description might suggest that “Starless” comes across as a muddled mess, the band maintains coherent through the use of a well-known classical compositional technique: motivic variation. Elements of the developmental riff and the freely improvised section reference portions of the two minor themes of the opening song. They provide ample material for elaboration partially because they are very different. The first, presented as an introduction on the guitar with a cyclic I6-V6/4 progression played on the Mellotron as accompaniment, proceeds fluidly, without rests, in primarily stepwise motion (Ex. VI-10).

The melody rises towards the B-flat at the beginning of each phrase, but quickly falls away. Combined with the absence of the tonic pitch from the bass, the melody’s arpeggiated descent creates a sense of aimlessness. Wetton’s vocal entrance provides the missing note. However, his entrance heightens tension rather than diminishes it, because his melody contrasts sharply with the first theme. The vocal line repeatedly halts and moves primarily in intervals of a third or larger, implying the vocalisms of a man who is having difficulty speaking. Several times, Wetton places words a half-beat or more later than expected, adding to the line’s stuttering quality (Ex. VI-11). He finally cadences on the tonic (G4) at the end of the fourth phrase, which serves as a refrain. Therefore, while the first melody begins high and travels downward, the second theme moves in the opposite direction.

After three verses, the bridge/development begins with a bass ostinato that shares many characteristics with the song’s vocal melody (Ex. VI-12). It includes primarily skips (with one prominent

⁸⁷ Though the section carries all of the hallmarks of Fripp’s solo style, it was actually composed primarily by Bill Bruford; see Smith, 200.

half-step), and some of the notes sound early or late relative to listener expectations. The prevailing meter – 13/8 – also causes a degree of rhythmic disorientation. Over the top of the ostinato, Fripp floats an insistent guitar ostinato that consists of long strings of single notes. Fripp repeats each note 16 times before moving to the next, but generally moves downward, away from the tonic in the manner established by the main theme of the song. However, at the end of each cycle of the ostinato, both riffs cycle upward octatonically, and Bruford's drums enter on the third repeat.

At the track's nine-minute mark, the band suddenly erupts into a flurry of free improvisation at a presto tempo. Bruford provides a quick, straight eighth-note pulse that recalls the rhythms of bebop. Wetton's opening gesture contains most of the same pitches as in the previous ostinato, but moves four times as fast. From there, he departs from the pitches of the ostinato but maintains a consistent rhythm. In order to create contrast with the constant stream of notes in the preceding section, Fripp contributes only a few open chords to the improvisation. As most of the chords are in first or second inversion, they resemble the Mellotron accompaniment of the opening theme (Ex. VI-13).

This section also features the reappearance of Ian McDonald in King Crimson for the first time since 1969. His saxophone dominates the improvisation, as he plays quickly and constantly shifts register for dramatic effect. Though he moves in and out of the prevailing key of C minor, most of his lines resemble the shape of the first song theme (Ex. VI-14).

At 9:54, the "recapitulation" begins, and an oboe and soprano saxophone enter with an instrumental version of the second theme, thus reversing their original order. The pitch and rhythmic content of the melody are unchanged, but this time Bruford's incessant sixteenth-note pulse on the hi-hat continues, giving the melody a relentless quality that it lacks on its first appearance. The first theme follows, stated by the guitar and horns, bringing the piece to a satisfying finale, though the tempo remains fast. The inclusion of the extra instruments adds weight to the end of the piece and clarifies

that the restatement of the main themes does not indicate a return to the emotional affect of the opening, but instead is a reinterpretation of those melodies and harmonies.

Chapter VII: The improvisations

Fripp's interest in free improvisation manifested as early as the sessions for *The Cheerful Insanity of Giles, Giles and Fripp*. While that album contains no fully-improvised tracks, the song "Erudite Eyes" concludes with a section of free improvisation that contains some nascent suggestions of King Crimson's improvisational style. After a two-minute song, the improvisation begins with Michael Giles establishing a strong $\frac{3}{4}$ beat on the ride cymbals. Fripp and bassist Peter Giles soon enter with arpeggios on an A minor chord. From 2:40 to 3:00, Michael Giles gradually increases the frequency of sixteenth notes in his pattern, and the bass and guitar respond by playing extended trills. After a brief climax at 3:24, the stringed instruments return to playing arpeggios. After a second section of trills, the improvisation reaches its final climax around four-and-a-half minutes, when it ceases to become a strict "improvisation:" several overdubbed Mellotron and guitar lines enter, courtesy of Fripp, greatly thickening the music's texture. The resulting piece is effective, and the use of an increased density to provide musical contrast presages many of the ideas found in later King Crimson tracks such as "Providence." However, in 1968 Fripp and his cohorts did not yet know how to create such textures without resorting to studio trickery.

King Crimson's earliest recorded attempt at free improvisation is the extended second section of "Moonchild," from their debut album *In the Court of the Crimson King*. The piece begins with an incomplete, pre-composed three-stanza song that has been overshadowed by the following improvisation since its release. Most reviewers, then and now, ignore the song and rightly criticize the improvisation for its lack of coherence, plodding tempo, and frequent moments of total silence. The group's willingness to experiment was laudable, but in their inexperience King Crimson failed to produce experimental music that was interesting to the listener as well as the performer.

The improvisation's primary sonorities consist of the guitar and vibraphone, with relatively few contributions from either Greg Lake on bass or the unpitched portions of Michael Giles's kit. The improvisation begins at the track's 2:20 mark with a sustained A minor chord (the tonic of the previous song) on the vibraphone. Gradually, other notes are heard alongside the A, eventually covering the entire A minor scale. Around 2:55, Fripp enters, playing diatonic patterns in the same key, but generally moving about twice as fast as that of the vibraphone, until the keyboard and guitar initiate a bit of subtle call-and-response at 3:20. Fripp and McDonald gradually switch from call-and-response to playing independent and simultaneous melodies. This polyphonic texture continues for several minutes, with Fripp finally (around 5:40) inserting a few chromatic tones. Giles also contributes occasional tom-tom rolls to this section, but never breaks into a standard rock beat or any sort of repeated pattern.

After the six-minute mark, Fripp and McDonald (on the vibraphone) gradually incorporate faster runs into their polyphonic responses. However, both choose to allow long pauses of little to no sound between phrases, negating any intensification that the smaller note values could create. This texture, reminiscent of Webern's pointillism, persists for the remainder of the track. Around the nine-minute mark, Fripp and Giles individually attempt to give the piece some shape by establishing a steady, metrical pattern. Giles first strikes the snare drum repeated for roughly fifteen seconds, implying a rather quick tempo. Fripp counters with a slow arpeggio. McDonald fails to buy in to either tempo, and by 10:23 the piece has lapsed back into slow, disconnected chords and licks. Fripp attempts to give the piece some tonal direction by modulating to A major for the final section, which only serves to make the piece blander.

The lack of rhythmic or tonal contrast in the "Moonchild" improvisation clearly marks it as the product of novice improvisers. Though a few of the textural shifts create surprising moments for the listener, overall the piece feels meandering and formless. Creating any sort of intensity graph in an

effort to better describe “Moonchild” proves fruitless, because the intensity of the piece remains low throughout. In this respect, “Moonchild” is inferior even to the less-developed improvisation in “Erudite Eyes.” Given Giles’s and McDonald’s soon-to-be-revealed desire to return to more commercial styles, perhaps the failure of “Moonchild” was to be expected.

The group produced relatively few full improvisations during the unstable years separating *In the Court of the Crimson King* and *Larks’ Tongues in Aspic*. The improvisations found on the infamous live album *Earthbound* (featuring the *Islands* lineup) generally rely on improvisation akin to that of modal jazz. Not until the hiring of Bill Bruford, Jamie Muir, and John Wetton in late 1972 would King Crimson again become innovators in the field of improvised music. Frequently, Wetton’s bass lines dictated the structure and tonal direction of many of the group’s improvisations during his tenure.

Of the band’s “bass-led” improvisations, “We’ll Let You Know” (charted in Ex. VII-1) reveals the bass’s structural function most obviously.⁸⁸ Recorded in Glasgow in October 1973, the track begins with a sequence of cautious chords from Fripp and Cross. The chords clearly place the piece in the key of F, which would become a favorite tonality of the group. The piece stays in F throughout, unlike some of their later improvisations, which change tonal center frequently. At this point, King Crimson still creates musical tension in their improvisations primarily through shifts in rhythm and texture. In “We’ll Let You Know,” John Wetton clearly controls the track’s rhythmic flow. For the first minute and a half, Bruford, Cross, and Fripp play in a pointillist style, sounding only individual notes and chords with considerable space between utterances. Wetton remains almost entirely absent until about one-and-a-half minutes into the proceedings, when he abruptly enters with a four-note ascending riff or tetrachord that outlines F Lydian modality and suggests a medium-tempo rock style beat. He later employs similar tetrachordal

⁸⁸ In the intensity graphs, thick, shorter lines refer to the appearance and disappearance (and relative intensity) of individual, qualifiable musical events such as riffs or drum patterns. The thin, longer lines refer to the general intensity of the entire ensemble, which is primarily a factor of density of notes, volume, and tempo.

riffs as structural markers in other improvisations, which indicates its usefulness as a device of formal delineation.

Immediately after the entrance of this four-note bass pattern, the guitar echoes the riff. Because both Wetton and Fripp have now moved into a more rhythmically active section of the piece, Bruford chooses to increase the musical tension by beginning a minute-long drum roll, accompanied by a crescendo. At the climax of Bruford's fill (about 2:09) the whole band stops. Wetton, however, senses that the piece cannot end there and instead continues with a double-time version of his earlier riff. Tonally, the two treble players have now accepted Wetton's F as the key of choice, and make no effort to change it. Instead, all the players (including Bruford, who segues into a backbeat by 2:48) begin to play seemingly random notes, though they are mostly diatonic in the key of F. Wetton continues to emphasize F with his bass riff, but otherwise the piece loses its tonal bearing.

Perhaps feeling that there is no place else to go, the band stops quickly around the piece's 3:30 mark, ending the improvisation sooner than they typically would in later years. The lack of tonal variation forces the piece's short duration. Though the rhythmic and textural variations King Crimson uses are dramatic, they alone cannot sustain musical interest for more than a few minutes.⁸⁹ At this point, the group still had not yet learned how to utilize key or mode effectively during an improvisation.

A contemporaneous track, "Trio," (Ex. VII-2) displays that the group's skill at creating tonal contrast did not yet match their abilities to use rhythm and texture to provide shape to their improvisations. Because Bruford chose to sit out this particular improvisation, the piece lacks any driving rhythm. The result is one of King Crimson's most ethereal and beautiful improvised tracks. Pitched in C major rather than the group's typical F, the track differs significantly from nearly all of their

⁸⁹ In the 1980s, the band released several albums of music that featured songs built around a principle of minimal variations over long periods of time, much like the music of Steve Reich. However, that style clearly required too much pre-planning to be executed effectively in an improvised setting.

other improvisations in that it contains only notes diatonic to the C major scale, with the exception of occasional flat sixth in Wetton's repeated bass line. All four performers seem to decide early in the improvisation that its serenity would be broken by extensive chromaticism. The lack of percussion results in a need for tonal contrast, but harmonic structure of "Trio" seems predictable and not inherently interesting.

The track begins with a simple oscillation between E and F, played by Fripp on the Mellotron, set to a flute patch. At first, the two notes hold the potential to signify any number of keys, but after Wetton enters, the pair cadence on two consecutive phrases in C major. Following the :50 mark, Wetton takes over the oscillation originally played by Fripp, adding an arpeggio that implies that the F and E represent IV and I chords in first inversion. Wetton continues this oscillation for several minutes while Fripp and Cross (who enters at about 1:05) alternate measure-long statements, with Fripp's Mellotron generally occupying a higher register than Cross's violin. This pattern underpins the bulk of the piece. From 1:05 to 2:35, Wetton alternates between IV and I chords, creating dramatic tension by switching inversions. At first, he oscillates between a IV chord in root position and a first-inversion tonic triad (Ex. VII-2). After the 2:35 mark, he switches to a first-inversion subdominant chord and a second-inversion tonic, implying (but not realizing) a movement towards the dominant. Wetton, therefore, controls the dramatic structure of the improvisation through his choice of chord voicing. Then, from 3:34 to the end of the piece, he extends this pattern to encompass a complete, chaconne-like descent from the tonic to the subdominant, still avoiding the dominant chord. Though effective, his choice of chords plots a somewhat predictable harmonic path, and leaves little room for chromatic or non-tonal elaboration. Wetton seems to be developing his skills as an improvisational leader, but he still relies on relatively basic patterns and tonal progressions.

Nonetheless, the other players respond to his gradual buildup of tension. Around 2:02, the violin and Mellotron exchange places, with Cross's part shifting to the higher register. As Cross moves up the fretboard, both he and Fripp elongate their melodies, playing simultaneously rather than in alternation. At 4:55, Cross strings together several previously-heard melodic fragments into the piece's only memorable "theme," which is harmonically consonant with the complex arpeggio pattern played by Wetton. His reaction to the change in the bass progression is almost instantaneous, indicating that the band had by this point developed a relatively high level of responsiveness. Fripp retreats into the background, using the Mellotron to fill in chords and play quiet countermelodies, allowing Cross and Wetton to dominate the piece's final half-minute. At 5:20, however, Fripp re-enters with a sequence of descending minor seconds. With this specific closing gesture, he takes control of the forward momentum of the piece, which had previously been dictated by Wetton. The string players respond with a soft plagal cadence at 5:30, bringing the improvisation to a rather abrupt end.

On the same tour, the band recorded "Starless and Bible Black" (Ex. VII-3), an improvisation that eventually shared its title with the group's sixth album. "Starless and Bible Black" represents a more advanced sense of harmony than the dominantly diatonic tracks "Trio" and "We'll Let You Know." The piece opens in an A-based modality, before rather abruptly modulating and ending in E major. The track is also perhaps the best of the group's drum-led improvisations; it utilizes Bruford's percussion as the dominant structural determinant rather than Wetton's bass lines. Wetton contributes very little to the harmonic and formal layout of the improvisation. Until the modulation (around the seven-minute mark) he plays only continuous, arpeggiated A minor and A diminished chords. Bruford typically cues the other players of a pending musical mutation through the use of an extended fill or change in register, and Fripp and Cross respond by moving into a different texture or mode.

Despite Bruford's leading role in "Starless and Bible Black," he allows Cross and Fripp to dominate the first ninety seconds of the track; the two treble players sustain a number of long tones in various modalities before finally settling uneasily on A. Bruford accompanies them with a sustained sweep on the wind chimes. After Cross and Fripp pick a key, Bruford finally begins to maintain a consistent pulse. Wetton hesitantly follows the drums, at first playing on the pitch A, as if he is unsure what key area to inhabit.

Bruford articulates and controls all of the remaining sectional breaks. The first occurs at 3:49. After several minutes of steady common time, Bruford introduces cross-rhythms on the higher-pitched toms and woodblocks, creating a three-beat pattern against the dominant 4/4 meter. At 4:00, Cross (having switched to the Mellotron) responds with his own three-beat pattern, striking the note A repeatedly in various octaves and accenting every third eighth note, twice as fast as Bruford's pattern. Fripp and Wetton, sensing a chance to create tension, remain in common time.

The second sectional break occurs at 4:40, when Bruford increases the frequency of his attacks and adds several more distinct drums to his pattern. He switches from a moderately-paced eight-beat style beat to a quick sixteen-beat style beat and accents several upbeats rather than just the second and fourth pulses of each bar. The treble players (Cross and Fripp) respond to Bruford's rhythmic disruption with complementary harmonic disruption: at the five-minute mark, the Mellotron and guitar launch into a series of split-third chords based on A, providing the piece's most dissonant moment to that point.

Having reached a point of high intensity, Bruford chooses to lessen the frequency of his attacks and move back into a higher register at 6:09. This time, Cross and Fripp respond with a musical gesture that matches Bruford's phrasing rather than contrasting with it. Both players follow the upward trajectory of the percussive "melody" before falling back down to a cadence on A major at 6:40. This "landing" sounds quite final, but Bruford decides to continue the piece by presenting a new rhythmic

ostinato in $\frac{3}{4}$. In a similar move to that heard at 4:40, Fripp responds to the rhythmic modulation by changing key, to E major. The slower, more sporadic drumming cues Fripp to present a softer, more diatonic theme in E major. Wetton, who had been maintaining a static arpeggio on A for several minutes, simply drops a fourth to a similar ostinato on E.

“Starless and Bible Black” ends with an abrupt return to common time, followed by all of the instruments quickly ending their lines and stopping in an uncoordinated manner. On the album track, the climactic return occurs at 8:20, but Fripp later stated that he removed several minutes of the original improvisation in order to minimize the album’s running length and preserve sound quality. The unedited improvisation can be found on several official bootlegs. However, even with the added content, the somewhat abrupt ending carries the same effect; the extra two minutes consist largely of diatonic scales and arpeggios in $\frac{3}{4}$ similar to those found between 7:00 and 8:20 in the album version. Therefore, though “Starless and Bible Black” displays a marked improvement in terms of musical drama and coherence over “We’ll Let You Know,” “Peoria,” or “Moonchild,” it feels incomplete, as it lacks a compelling ending. Rather than returning to the opening key or rhythmic figure, or gradually increasing intensity until reaching a natural climax, the players simply stop, as if they have run out of ideas.

By the summer of 1974, the Wetton/Bruford edition of King Crimson had toured enough together that they produced consistently exciting and musically multifaceted tracks of free improvisation, which contain clear and distinct beginnings, middles, and endings. The group’s approach grew more standardized, though not due to any vocalized plan on the part of one or more of the musicians; rather, from the common experience of the performers, who slowly learned the most effective methods for shaping improvised music in a dramatic manner. Bruford claims that this was the period during which he began to consider the dramatic shape of the band’s pieces during the process of the improvisations themselves. At the same time, he also states that he always tried to avoid forcing a

particular form or structure on an improvisation, and instead attempted to allow the group's structures to evolve out of simultaneous, uncoordinated decisions by two or more players.⁹⁰

Recorded on 29 June 1974, "Is There Life Out There?" (Ex. VII-4, found on the *Great Deceiver* box set) showcases many of the band's recently-developed techniques and represents a marked improvement over their improvisations of a year before. After nearly two years of constant "practice," the band had learned how to clearly express a musical form in a collectively-improvised format, even without pre-determined tonal centers, rhythmic cues, or sectional durations. Divided broadly into three sections, the piece's musical interest derives from the band's ability to vary not only the key and tempo, but also the music's texture and coordinated shifts in texture and key so that musical climaxes remain clear. Nonetheless, moments of indecisive "fishing" for notes and riffs remain, indicating that "Is There Life Out There?" has not been unduly thought-out.

The piece begins in a relatively straightforward manner. Bruford enters alone, laying out a clear 4/4 swing rhythm. After ten seconds, he drops out and Wetton immediately enters, repeating a variant of the tetrachord he utilized nine months earlier in "We'll Let You Know." A period of rhythmic instability follows, with Cross and Fripp sustaining long notes while the drums and bass engage in a lively battle of call-and-response. All four emphasize the pitch F (by far their favorite key for improvisations), and none of the musicians move quickly to any other tonal areas for the sake of contrast. Thankfully, Bruford re-enters within the first minute with a standard rock beat. His entrance invigorates a piece that initially seems in danger of becoming static, as none of the players are willing to create musical tension through the use of a contrasting key.

Once Bruford establishes the tempo, the band spends several minutes engaging in what might be considered more "traditional" improvising, as Bruford and Wetton repeat a specific rhythmic pattern

⁹⁰ Bill Bruford, interview with the author, Kansas City, Missouri, October 20th, 2011.

many times over (from 1:10 to 3:10). At first, Cross plays long notes on the Mellotron while Fripp engages in a flurry of scales, outlining several different F-centered modes. Around the two-minute mark, Cross takes over the role of featured soloist (on the Mellotron) and Fripp steps into the background, picking up the long tones previously played by Cross. Due to the division between the “soloist” and the “accompaniment,” as well as Cross and Fripp’s independent choices to remain in F, this particular two-minute section quickly becomes homophonic in texture, and most closely resembles blues-based improvisation practiced by heavy metal and blues rock bands.

By the 3:10 mark, the traditional rock beat begins to break down, as Bruford and Wetton simultaneously try to change the tempo of the piece. Bruford attempts to move faster, but Wetton slows his harmonic rhythm. The disjunction results in a general slowing of the tempo as the band reconvenes and tests out several new musical ideas. First, Cross presents a see-sawing idea that alternatively outlines F and G-diminished chords. Wetton follows and replicates the motion, but the others refrain from joining in, so the pair abandons the idea. Cross and Fripp then proceed with several seconds of call-and-response, which eventually reaches such a speed that it no longer resembles “call-and-response” and instead sounds more like classical hocket technique. The guitar and Mellotron lines also rise rapidly in pitch and dynamics, until they reach an intense climax at 5:30. Shortly before this, Wetton re-involves himself in the musical fabric, echoing some of the rhythms presented by Cross.

Importantly, Wetton chooses to play E-flat rather than F at the conclusion of the “hocket” section. Combined with the shift from predominantly homophonic to polyphonic texture, the bass’s modulation creates the necessary long-term musical tension that the band could not summon in “We’ll Let You Know.” After the 5:30 mark, Wetton continues in E-flat, Bruford largely removes himself from the musical fabric, and Cross returns to the held Mellotron tones from the first section, in the new key.

At 5:50, the now-ubiquitous bass tetrachordal riff re-enters, this time alternating between E-flat and F-centered iterations.

Fripp's contribution to the developmental section, however, prevents the band from simply returning to the opening material. Shortly after the bass resumes the tetrachord riff at 5:50, the guitar enters with a long string of short, angular riffs, which constantly shift accent against the prevailing meter. Most of the statements ascend and descend quickly, which contrasts sharply with the generally stepwise and legato melodies presented earlier. Furthermore, Fripp's riffs frequently venture outside of both E-flat and F modal scales, and his inclusion of numerous rests invites polyphonic elaboration. Thus, when Bruford again establishes a rock beat (at 7:20) the music does not instantly resemble that heard from 1:10 to 3:10. Instead, King Crimson modifies and develops the opening material by utilizing significantly different textures and rhythmic values. From 7:20 to the close of the track at 11:20, the guitar and Mellotron utilize hocket technique almost constantly, frequently crawling up and down scales in tandem, with pervasive chromaticism. After re-establishing a tonic on F, the bass also joins in the hocket technique around the ten-minute mark. Simultaneously, Bruford increases the pace of the music by switching from an eight-beat style beat to a sixteen-beat rhythm. The closing section relies on many of the same metrical and harmonic signposts as the piece's opening, but the shift to a polyphonic texture and more complex style beat gives the piece more relentless forward motion and provides finality to the piece.

"Is There Life Out There?" represents a significant improvement over most of the 1973 improvisations in terms of complexity and musical unity. Whereas the earlier pieces typically only utilize rhythm as a primary method of dramatic contrast, "Is There Life Out There?" includes notable variations of both rhythmic patterns and texture. Variation of key is less pronounced, with only the less-than-

conclusive nods to E-flat in the middle section representing a departure from the key of F. However, the stark changes in texture and rhythm between the first and third sections keeps the music compelling.

A second improvisation from the summer of 1974, "Asbury Park," remains something of an oddity in the band's catalogue, as its structure contains equal contributions from Bruford and Wetton, rather than being dominated by one or the other. A simpler improvisation than "Is There Life Out There?" it is nonetheless effective. (As the intensity and texture of the piece does not vary significantly, a graph provides little useful insight in this case.) After Bruford introduces the piece with a basic rock beat, Fripp enters with several F chords. Wetton originally disagrees with Fripp's choice of tonality and plays a number of three-note motives in distant keys, such as B and F#. However, by 0:35, he switches to Fripp's choice of tonality, and establishes a chord progression not dissimilar to that of a chaconne.

Wetton's move to a more stable bass pattern indicates to the melody players that they are free to elaborate, and Fripp and Cross switch from playing long tones to rapidly shifting between held chords and streams of thirty-second notes. However, Bruford cuts off their momentum by clearly cueing a stop around 3:00. In a move that almost feels as if he is trying to battle Bruford for control, Wetton waits a second before launching into a new and more complicated riff, adding a raised sixth to his chaconne progression. Fripp and Cross resume their thirty-second notes.

Wetton attempts to end the piece at 3:50, when he begins a long series of measures in which he only plays the dominant, and then comes crashing down on the tonic at 4:28. However, Bruford intentionally ignores the ending formula just as Wetton did 90 seconds earlier. The drummer returns with a slow sixteen-beat style beat, perhaps attempting to give the piece a contrasting middle section. However, the other three musicians decide to quickly end the improvisation. "Asbury Park," therefore, only serves to clarify the overarching importance of Wetton and Bruford's decisions during King Crimson's improvisations.

The night after cutting “Is There Life Out There,” King Crimson produced “Providence,” (charted in Ex. VII-5) arguably the apex of their Bruford-era improvisations. Gradual unfolding of key center, texture, and rhythmic intensity all contribute to the piece’s overall dramatic arch. More so than in King Crimson’s previous improvisations, shifts in texture, tempo, and key center line up temporally, demonstrating the band’s increasing ability to anticipate each other’s musical choices.

Tonally, “Providence” develops from an unstable opening, vacillating between E, F, and B, to an eventual climax of pitch synchronicity on F. At first, each of the three melodic instruments (guitar, violin, and bass) center upon separate pitches. The violinist opens the piece alone, fluttering between E and F with occasional stabs towards other notes. Despite his minor chromatic alterations, Cross clearly emphasizes the pitch E on most downbeats. Fripp enters (at timestamp 0:57) with a swirl of low feedback, prominently featuring F. While perhaps unintentional, Fripp’s reinforcement of Cross’s secondary pitch destabilizes the piece, especially because Fripp’s F sits several octaves below Cross’s “tonic” E. Wetton’s bass enters at 1:17, but his first few attempts to join the fray are fragmentary and short. The bass does not establish a sustained melodic line until 2:10, when Wetton calls upon the memories of improvisations past and plays a variant of the “ascending tetrachord” heard on tracks from earlier in the year. His tetrachord outlines the tritone between F and B, introducing the latter as a tertiary area of tonal interest.

To this point, the music has remained rhythmically loose, with no player sustaining a single metrical feeling for more than a few seconds at a time. However, around the piece’s 2:30 mark, Bruford begins attacking the kit with increasing frequency. He avoids establishing a consistent meter, however, and therefore accentuates the opening’s tonal instability with a dash of rhythmic ambiguity. During this early section of the piece, Bruford generally favors the more resonant portions of his drumset, such as the crash cymbal and bells. While he cannot directly echo the melodic lines of the pitched instruments,

his choice to isolate the non-drum surfaces allows for extended interplay among the violin, percussion, and Mellotron (which Fripp and Cross both play sporadically). Cross also occasionally plays ascending scales between F and B, recalling the tetrachord first presented by Wetton. This interplay lasts from 2:05 until 3:25, when all four players abruptly stop. Because no one tonality or meter has become dominant, the sudden stop serves rhetorically as a colon; it indicates that the piece is not finished and more will follow. As the music leading up to the pause hints at several different keys and meters, “Providence’s” first 3:25 also serves as an “exposition,” in the sense that it presents several conflicting musical ideas. The decision of all four players to pause at that particular moment suggests that the musicians were aware that they had reached a significant musical moment and needed to pause before continuing with a new section.

The second portion of the piece, which lasts from 3:25 roughly until the eight-minute mark, features the slowly-increasing dominance of a single metrical pattern and key (F). From 3:25 until about the five-minute mark, the guitar joins the drums with sharp, percussive attacks that gradually grow more frequent; Bruford also incorporates lower-pitched toms into his playing. At the same time, the bass and violin repeat the tetrachord previously established by the bass, ascending in pitch each time (though beginning at different pitch levels relative to each other). Bruford’s quickening attacks morph into a mid-tempo rock beat at 5:09, and the other instruments quickly follow suit, shifting their focus to more repetitive and tonally stable patterns than before.⁹¹ At 5:15, the bass slips into an ostinato pattern on F and B, thus preserving the tonal ambiguity of the opening (though removing the previous focus on E as a key center). This new riff develops logically from the preceding tetrachord, but also matches the syncopation of the newly-established drum beat. For roughly one minute, the melody instruments (guitar and violin) decrease their rhythmic activity, providing a background of long tones on B, F, and F

⁹¹ See chapter III for the definition of a “rock beat.”

sharp, and allowing the bass and drums to increase the track's momentum through the sheer force of their rhythm.

From 6:18 to 6:40 Fripp and Cross gradually shift from long tones to repeated single notes, and at the 6:40 mark all four musicians decide to reach the climax of their long crescendo, which has been building for more than three minutes. Once again anticipated by Wetton, the band launches into a barrage of repeated B naturals, seemingly choosing this pitch as the ultimate "tonic" of the piece. The aggressive unison implies such finality that at 7:25 Bruford assumes the piece is over, smacking the snare drum and crash cymbal with authority and dropping out.

The section that follows represents one of the delightful surprises that can only occur within a freely improvised framework. Despite Bruford's sonic insistence that the piece has ended, Cross and Wetton continue at low volume after Bruford's cymbals fade. Also, Cross returns to modal F, undermining the finality of the cadence on B and, rather, suggesting that B actually functions as a substitute "dominant" key area. The extended coda also provides a less-obvious conclusion for "Providence" than the piece might have had if the band had simply ended by playing as loudly as possible. Cross's decision to continue in F makes the piece seem like the expression of a complete musical drama, with multiple layers of emotion and meaning.

Even at the time, the band recognized the power of the piece and decided to include it on their "final" album, *Red*. Unfortunately, space constraints forced the group to remove the final two minutes, including the modal denouement. Thankfully, the full version can be found on several other collections. "Providence's" lasting critical success can be attributed to its clear display of the four musicians collaborating and "debating" during the process of improvisation. The magic of the piece derives from the listener hearing the group's compositional process whilst simultaneously hearing the composition itself. King Crimson's ability to merge the spontaneity of improvisation with the dramatic impact of

coordinated musical structure has cemented their legacy among avant-garde and forward-thinking musicians of today.

Chapter VIII: Beyond 1974 and Conclusions

Robert Fripp's attitude towards his music cannot be easily summarized, but one of his recent statements provides a generous glimpse (by Fripp standards) into his musical mind. When questioned by interviewer Ludovic Hunter-Tilney about his current isolation and lack of productivity, Fripp responded obliquely, saying "the quality of artistry is the capacity to assume innocence at will, the quality of experiencing innocence as if for the first time."⁹² For Fripp, at least, the continual re-invention of King Crimson has preserved this artistic innocence; specifically, Fripp has avoided the dreaded musical trap of creating and/or recreating a specific style in order to please a chosen consumer group.⁹³ When surrounded by like-minded musicians, as during King Crimson's "golden age" of 1972-1974, Fripp's desire for musical innocence manifested in the form of the band's powerful improvisations.

Their attempts to eliminate as much musical pre-planning as possible (partially due to the philosophies of Jamie Muir) also reflect this quest for innocence. Fripp's repeated dissolution and reformation of King Crimson during the early 1970s can be seen as a process of trial and error, as he sought other players willing to be as musically innocent as he was. He briefly succeeded with the Muir-Wetton-Bruford-Cross lineup, when King Crimson finally developed a method of improvisation that was completely free of pre-determination, but nevertheless organized and consistently dramatic. The group's albums and concerts from this period demonstrate the potential of this new approach to rock music, and subtly but distinctively changed the way many rock musicians viewed their own creative impulses. Notably, the performers and groups most clearly influenced by King Crimson hail from outside the typical progressive rock sphere: Nirvana's Kurt Cobain and the Melvin's King Buzzo, the two most

⁹² Ludovic Hunter-Tilney, "The Day the Music Died: An Interview with Robert Fripp," *The Financial Times*, August 3rd, 2012; recovered from <<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/f588e100-d7ee-11e1-9980-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2Cb8ayyx3>>, September 15th, 2012.

⁹³ Paul Hegarty and Martin Halliwell, *Beyond and Before: Progressive Rock Since the 1960s* (New York: Continuum International Publishing, 2011), 174.

significant progenitors of 1990s grunge, cited the extremity and unrestrained nature of King Crimson's improvisations as a significant influence on their brand of under-rehearsed, vicious rock.⁹⁴ 1970s King Crimson has also become the primary reference point for musicians such as John Zorn and the members of the bands Big Black and Sonic Youth, who incorporate extended improvisation into rock music much more directly. Staying true to the philosophies of their forebears, Zorn and Sonic Youth are not content to merely replicate the style of King Crimson, but rather apply many of the principles of King Crimson's improvisations in newly-created settings; Zorn's many ensembles often meld free improvisation with non-Western instrumentation and/or timbres and textures associated with punk rock, while Sonic Youth married extended, distorted, and feedback-laden solos with songs in the burgeoning alternative rock style to create what is now known as noise rock.

Despite the significant stylistic differences among these groups all utilize many of the same improvisational conventions drawn from the work of King Crimson. The first section of "Teenage Riot," the opening track from Sonic Youth's landmark *Daydream Nation*, unfolds in a manner not unlike that of "Providence" or "Is There Life Out There?" In this case, the overdriven guitar is the leading instrument, rather than the bass or drums. As in the aforementioned King Crimson improvisations, the musical drama of this introduction derives from each of the musicians initially operating independently, testing new keys, rhythms, riffs, and melodies in different combinations of ideas before reaching a point of musical unity.

The piece begins with guitarist Thurston Moore's loosely strumming chords built on D, C, and G. The pattern is cyclic and lacks any strong rhythmic accents, which leaves the key of the riff ambiguous. As all three chords receive equal musical attention, the listener can possibly interpret any one of them as the "tonic." About ten seconds into the track, a spoken female voice enters. She intones several

⁹⁴ Martin, 137.

seemingly unconnected statements that are out of sync with the pitch and rhythm of the guitar riff. At about this same point, the drummer enters with several tentative taps on the tom-toms. At 0:35, the drummer begins marking time with a rock style beat. The accents imply that the guitar's C chord occurs on the downbeat, suggesting it as a possible tonic. However, within five seconds of the drummer's entrance, the female voice begins repeating a single phrase, "sweet desire." She places the heaviest rhythmic accent on the last syllable, and aligns this syllable with the initial attacks of the D and G chords in the guitar riff, thereby implying that D and G are more important chords and that C is merely a passing chord. The disagreement over the downbeat results in all the musicians except Moore dropping out at 0:50. Five seconds later, the drummer and female vocalist re-enter, this time aligning both the beginning of the eight-beat rock beat and the initial syllable of "sweet desire" with the guitarist's D chord. The resulting coherence establishes both a key and tempo. The musicians continue to improvise for another thirty seconds, before stopping and launching into the pre-composed part of the track.

The efforts of Sonic Youth, as well as those of other Crimson-influenced musicians such as Brian Eno, have helped to create the modern attitude of openness and experimental intensity found in such diverse genres as avant-garde rock, indie rock, electronic music, and heavy metal. King Crimson can be seen as the progenitors of this approach; not only did they break away from the popular rock mold of the 1960s, but they also fearlessly moved beyond progressive rock itself when they felt that the style had become too set and restrictive. The group's attempts to innovate continuously, as well as their emphasis on displaying their compositional thought processes within improvisations, have fostered an Anglo-American rock culture in which musical experimentation is encouraged and formulas are considered optional. In the last decade, with the rise of the Internet as the primary method of musical distribution, King Crimson's influence has increased, despite the band's sporadic activity. Indeed, one is hard-pressed to find a modern indie or avant-garde rock group that does not openly acknowledge their debt to King Crimson, or at least borrow one or more aspects of their improvisational style.

In truth, Robert Fripp has been more successful in spreading his musical philosophies than he seems to think. In interviews, Fripp constantly complains of the difficulties and struggles he must endure in order to present his music to the public, exactly the way he wants it. However, many of his greatest recordings were created during times of extreme struggle; most significantly, the classic albums and live bootlegs of 1972-74. However, as demonstrated above, a sense of conflict within the music itself is in fact essential to the success and legacy of the music of that period. Perhaps, then, King Crimson's greatest accomplishment has been to promote and encourage a bold vision of artistic egalitarianism not previously seen in rock music. In that sense, their music can be seen as an essential link not only in the history of progressive rock, but also in the development of philosophical and aesthetic sensibilities across a wide range of significant musical styles.

Chapter V: The Songs

Ex. 1 – “21st Century Schizoid Man” Main Riff

Ascent to higher G to lower G

Ex. 2 – “21st Century Schizoid Man” Bridge Riff

Ascent to high G Descent to low G

Ex. 3 – “Lament” Opening Chords – *Root is supplied by the bass guitar.*

F#Maj7 F#M/m7 F#6

Ex. 4 – “Lament” Bridge Riff

4 Repeat 1/2 step higher

Ex. 5 – “Fallen Angel” Bridge Guitar Pattern

Am Bm Am Bm

Ex. 6 – “Fallen Angel” Trumpet Solo

Ex. 7 – “Easy Money” Verse – Brackets indicate perceived measures of 7/8

Tenor Solo

and stamp their feet In the heat from your_phys - ique as you twin - kle - by__ in

T. Solo

5

T. Solo

Electric Bass

Ex. 8a – “Great Deceiver” Verse Bass Pattern

Electric Bass

Ex. 8b – “Great Deceiver” Verse Bass and Voice

2-bar pattern (starts on beat 3)

Tenor Solo

Electric Bass

Healthfood fag - got bar-tered bri - de Likes to comb his hair with a

9

5-bar pattern

T. Solo

E. Bass

dip-per ride Once had a fri-end with a clo-ven fo-ot

15

T. Solo

E. Bass

Once he called the tune in a che-ckered suit!

Ex. 8c – “Great Deceiver” Verse Bass, Voice, and Drums

Drum notation key: Lowest space=bass drum; middle space=snare drum; space above staff= cymbal

2-bar pattern (starts on beat 3)

Tenor Solo

8

Healthfood fag - got bar-tered bri - de Likes to comb his hair

Electric Bass

5-bar pattern

Drum Set

2-bar pattern (accents beat 2)

8

T. Solo

with a dip-per ride Once had a fri-end with a

E. Bass

Dr.

14

T. Solo

8

clo - ven fo - ot Once he called the

E. Bass

Dr.

17

T. Solo

tune in a che-ckered suit!

E. Bass

Dr.

Ex. 9 – “Great Deceiver” Chorus Guitar and Voice

Tenor Solo

Ci - ga rettes - - - - cream

Electric Guitar

T. Solo

3

fig - ur - ines of the Vir - gin Ma - ry

E. Gtr.

Ex. 10a – “Formentera Lady” Introduction

Top notes: theme from verse melody

Double Bass

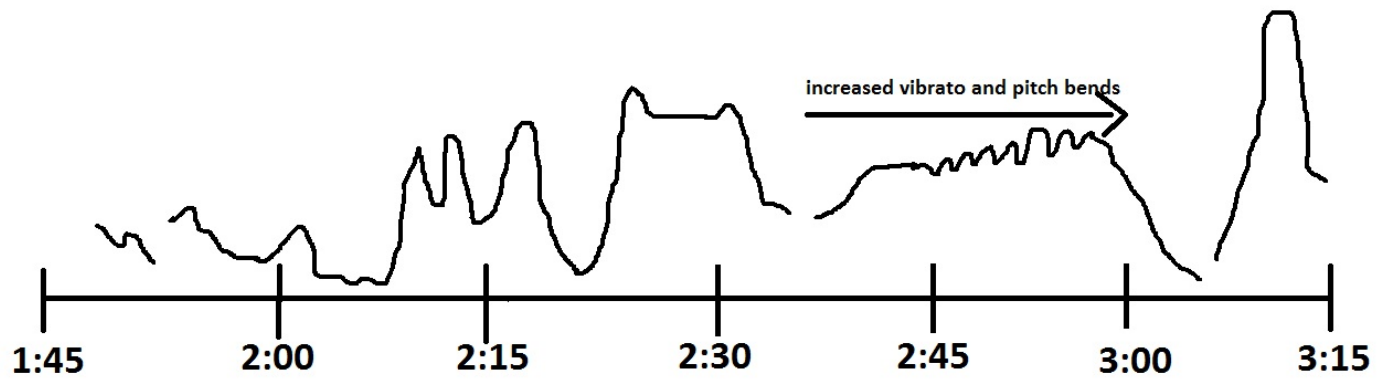
Bottom notes: loose inversion of chorus theme

Ex. 10b – “Formentera Lady” Main Theme

Tenor Solo

F'or - men - ter - a La - dy sing a song for me...

Ex. 11 – “The Letters,” saxophone solo



Ex. 12 – “Exiles,” main theme

Violin

Verse vocal theme

Sequential elaboration

Vln.

5

Chapter VI: The Instrumentals

Ex. 1a – “Song of the Gulls,” A Theme

Musical notation for Ex. 1a, featuring Oboe and Ob. parts. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is 3/4. The Oboe part starts with a whole note chord I, followed by a half note chord iii, a quarter note chord IV, and a whole note chord I. The Ob. part starts with a whole note chord vi, followed by a half note chord IV, a quarter note chord V, a half note chord IV, and a whole note chord I. A measure number '9' is written above the first measure of the Ob. part.

Ex. 1b – “Song of the Gulls,” B Theme

Musical notation for Ex. 1b, featuring Oboe part. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is 3/4. The Oboe part starts with a whole note chord vi, followed by a half note chord IV, a quarter note chord vi (add 7 and 9), a half note chord vi, and a whole note chord V. A measure number '6' is written below the sixth measure.

Ex. 2a – “Larks’ Tongues in Aspic, Part 2,” A theme, first section

Musical notation for Ex. 2a, featuring Electric Guitar part. The key signature is two flats (Bb, Eb) and the time signature is 4/4. The notation shows a series of eighth notes in a descending sequence across four measures.

Ex. 2b – “Larks’ Tongues in Aspic, Part 2,” A theme, second section

Musical notation for Ex. 2b, featuring Electric Guitar part. The key signature is two flats (Bb, Eb) and the time signature is 4/4. The notation shows a series of eighth notes in a descending sequence across four measures.

Ex. 3 – “Larks’ Tongues in Aspic, Part 2” B theme

Note the tritone relationship between D and A-flat, as in the second part of the A theme (Ex. 2b).

Rhythm from A theme, first part

Electric Guitar

D-centered

Violin

4

E. Gtr.

A-flat centered

Vln.

7

E. Gtr.

Vln.

Ex. 4a – “Fracture” A Theme

The accented notes outline two octatonic scales, both of which start with a whole step.

Octatonic scale on C#

Electric Guitar

2

E. Gtr.

Octatonic scale on D

4


E. Gtr.

Ex. 7 – “Larks’ Tongues in Aspic, Part 1” Initial violin theme


Repeat 3 times

simile

Violin




Electric Guitar




Cm: i I+(no 3rd)

4

Vln.




E. Gtr.



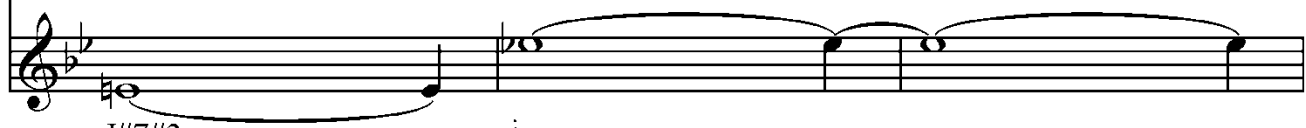
I#7/4

7

Vln.




E. Gtr.




I#7#3 i

10

Vln.




E. Gtr.



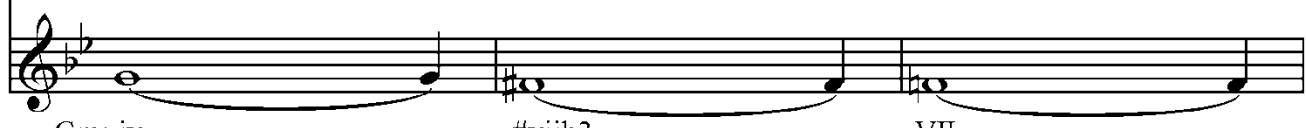
bVI7

13

Vln.




E. Gtr.

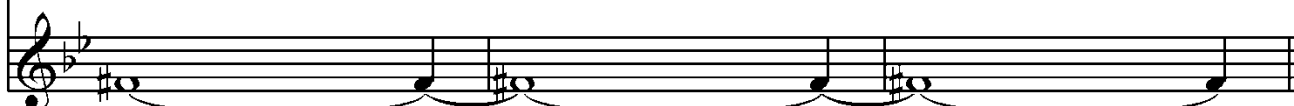


Gm: iv #viib3 VII

Ex. 7 continued

16 Directly to Ex. 8

Vln. 

Gtr. 

#viib3

Ex. 8 – “Larks’ Tongues in Aspic, Part 1” 7/4 riff


Electric Guitar 

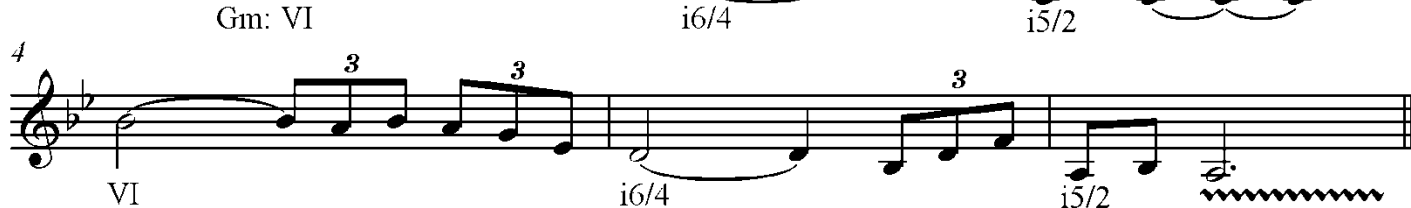
Ex. 9 – “Larks’ Tongues in Aspic, Part 1” Improvisational Section, Bass (timestamp 6:50). Time signature does not correspond with other parts.

Electric Bass 

E. Bass 

Ex. 10 – “Starless,” Main theme (guitar)





Ex. 14 – “Starless,” saxophone solo (excerpt)

Bar 1 of this excerpt corresponds with bar 4 of Ex. 13 above.

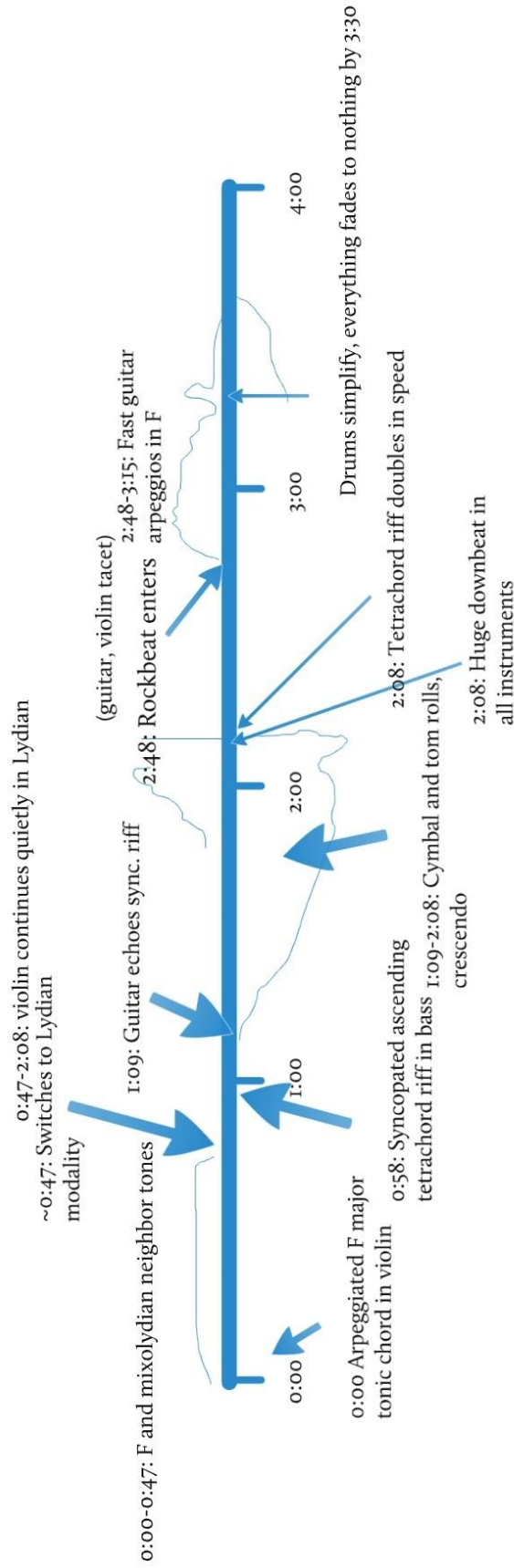
Descending pattern - from main theme (Ex. 10)

Alto Saxophone

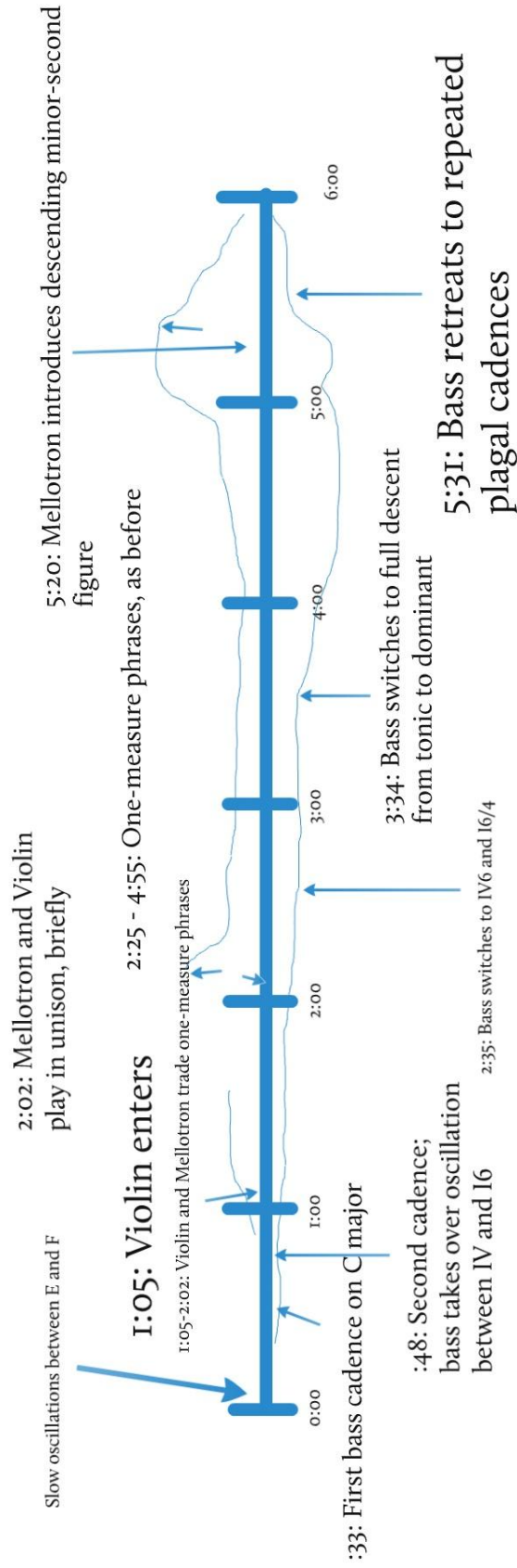
Alto Sax. 2

Alto Sax. 3

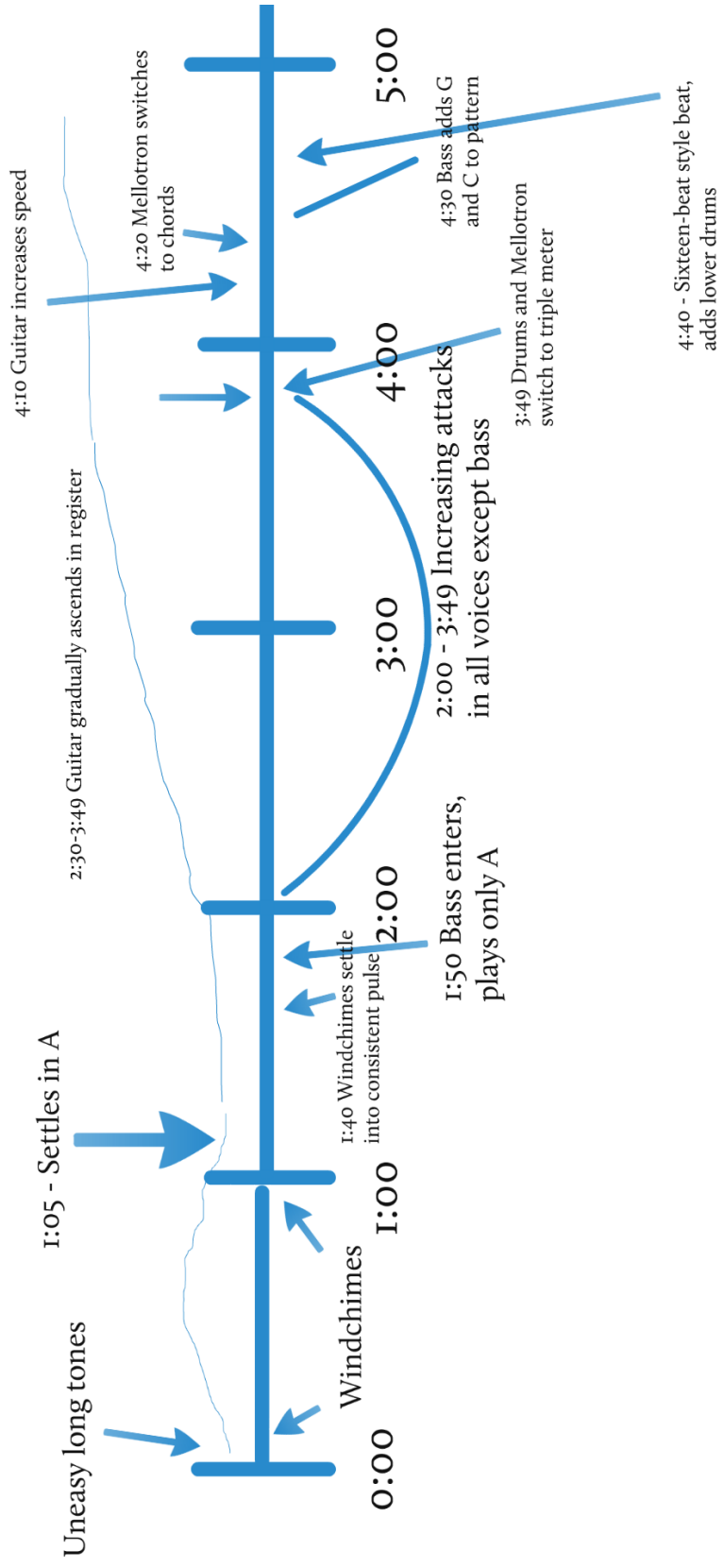
Chapter VII: The Improvisations: Ex. 1: "We'll Let You Know"

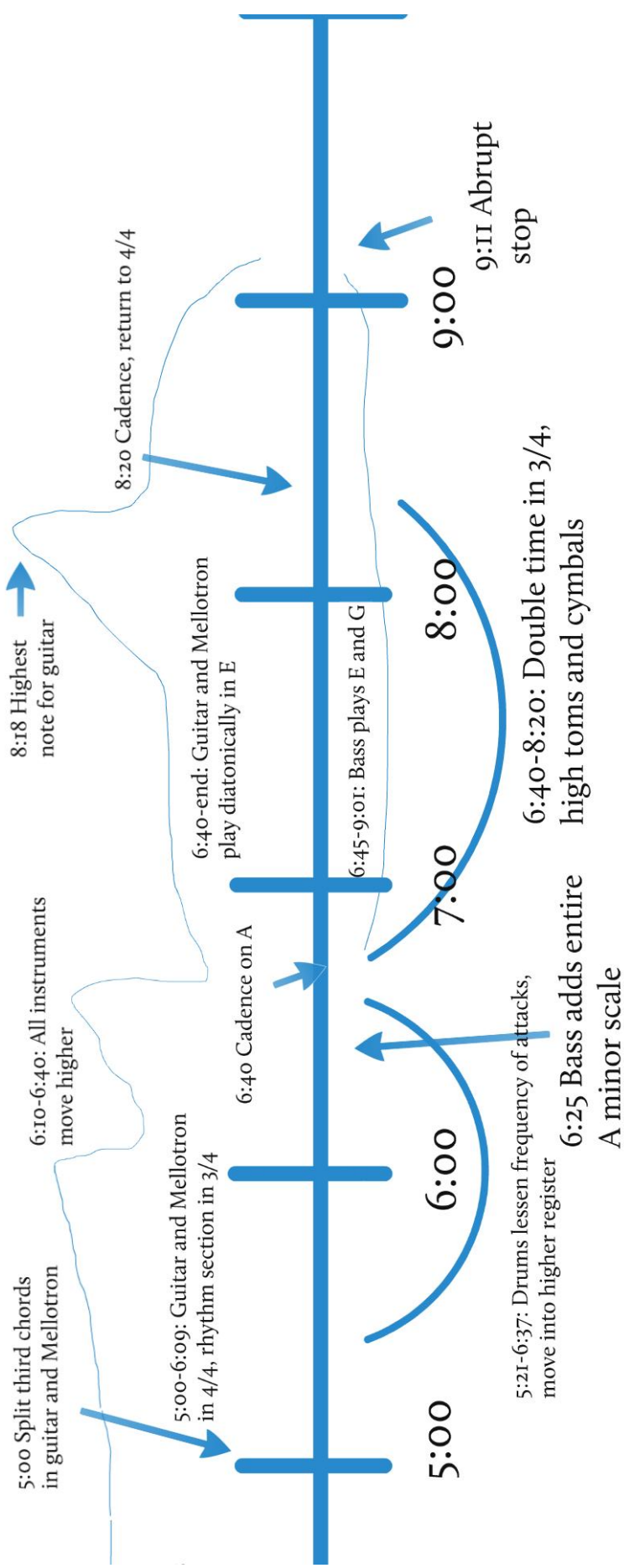


Example VII-2 – “Trio”

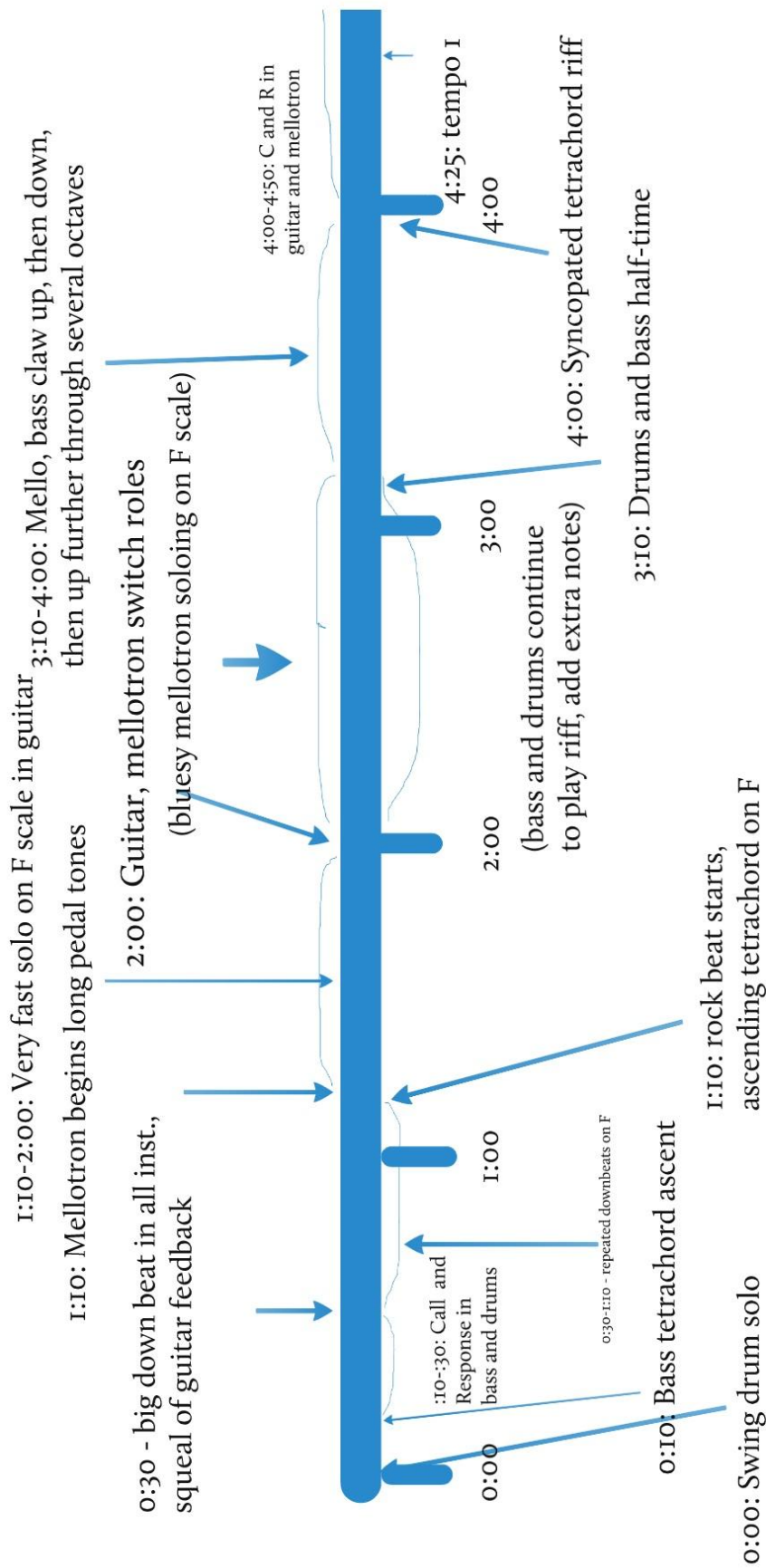


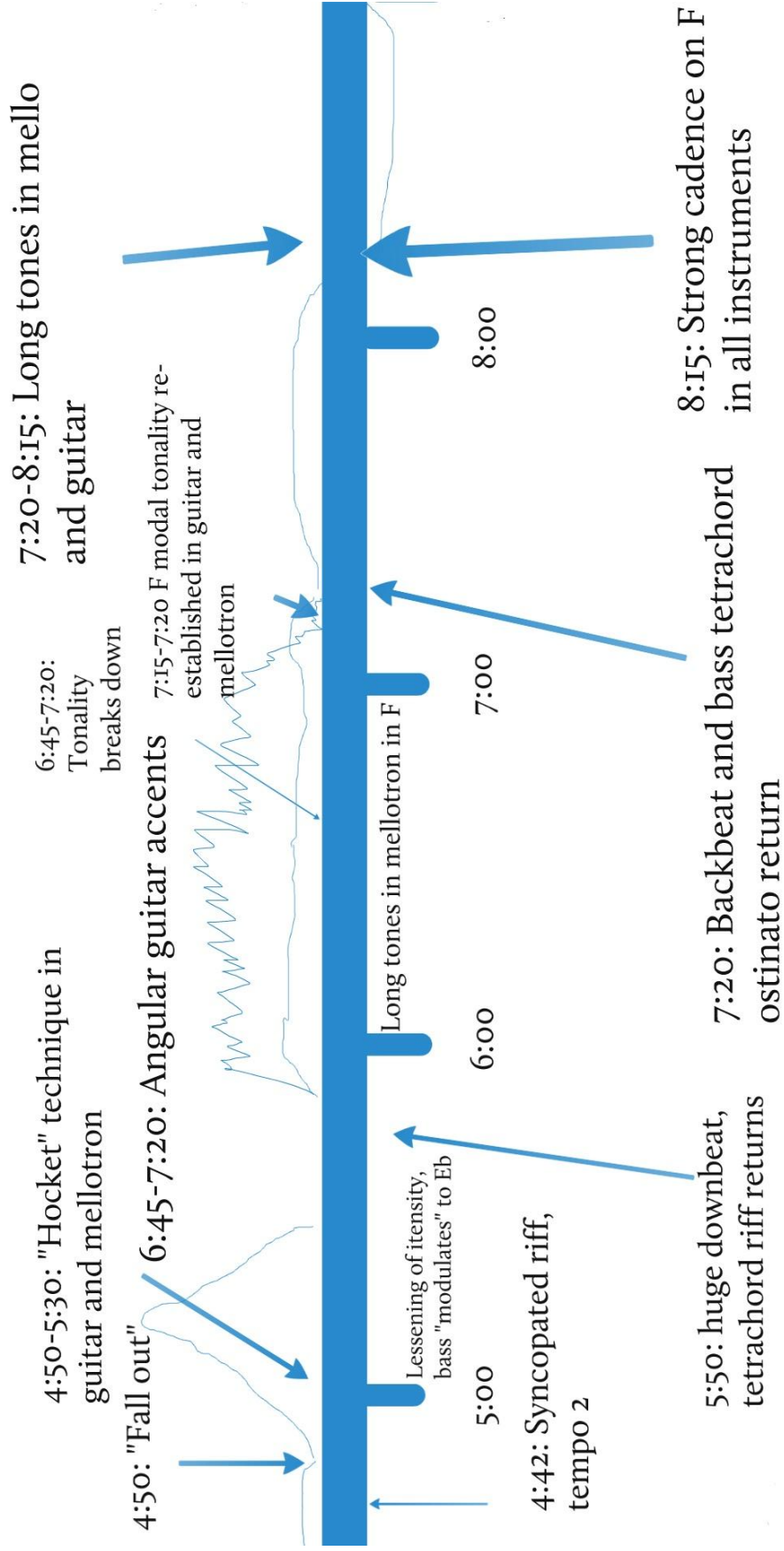
Example VII-3: "Starless and Bible Black"





Example VII-4 – “Is There Life Out There?”

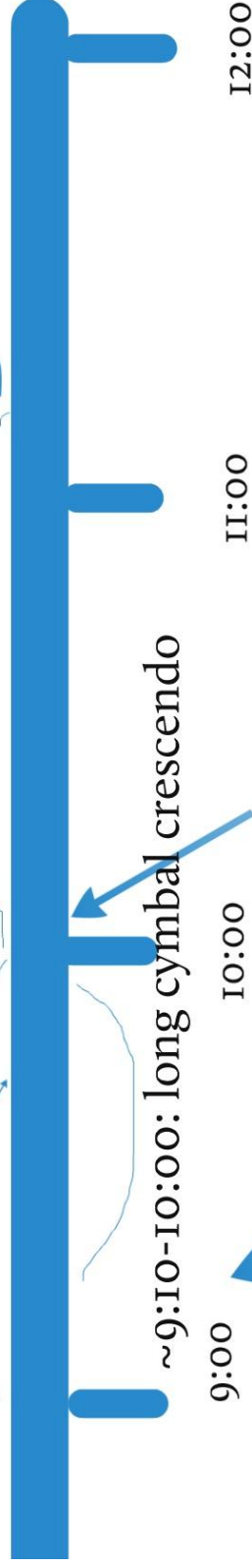




9:00-10:00: Hocket technique between bass and guitar

10:00-11:20: All three pitched instruments in hocket technique, moving slowly to three independent lines

9:45: Mellotron sneaks in
11:20: Abrupt stop, quiet mellotron chords fade away



~9:10-10:00: long cymbal crescendo

10:00: Huge downbeat, drums begin 16-beat rock rhythm

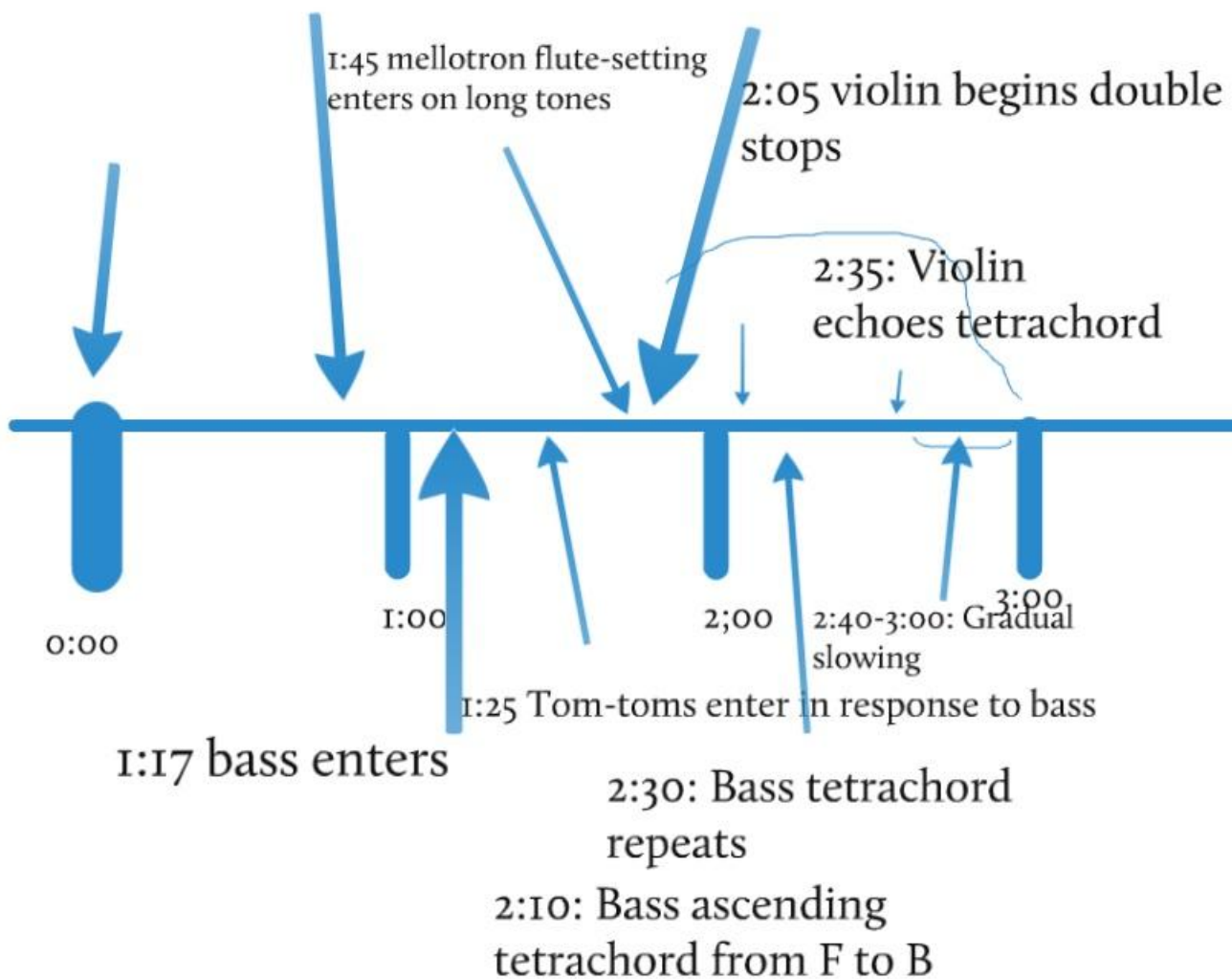
8:15-9:00: Bass alone developing tetrachord riff

Example VII-5 – “Providence

0:00: Slow violin flutters on E and F

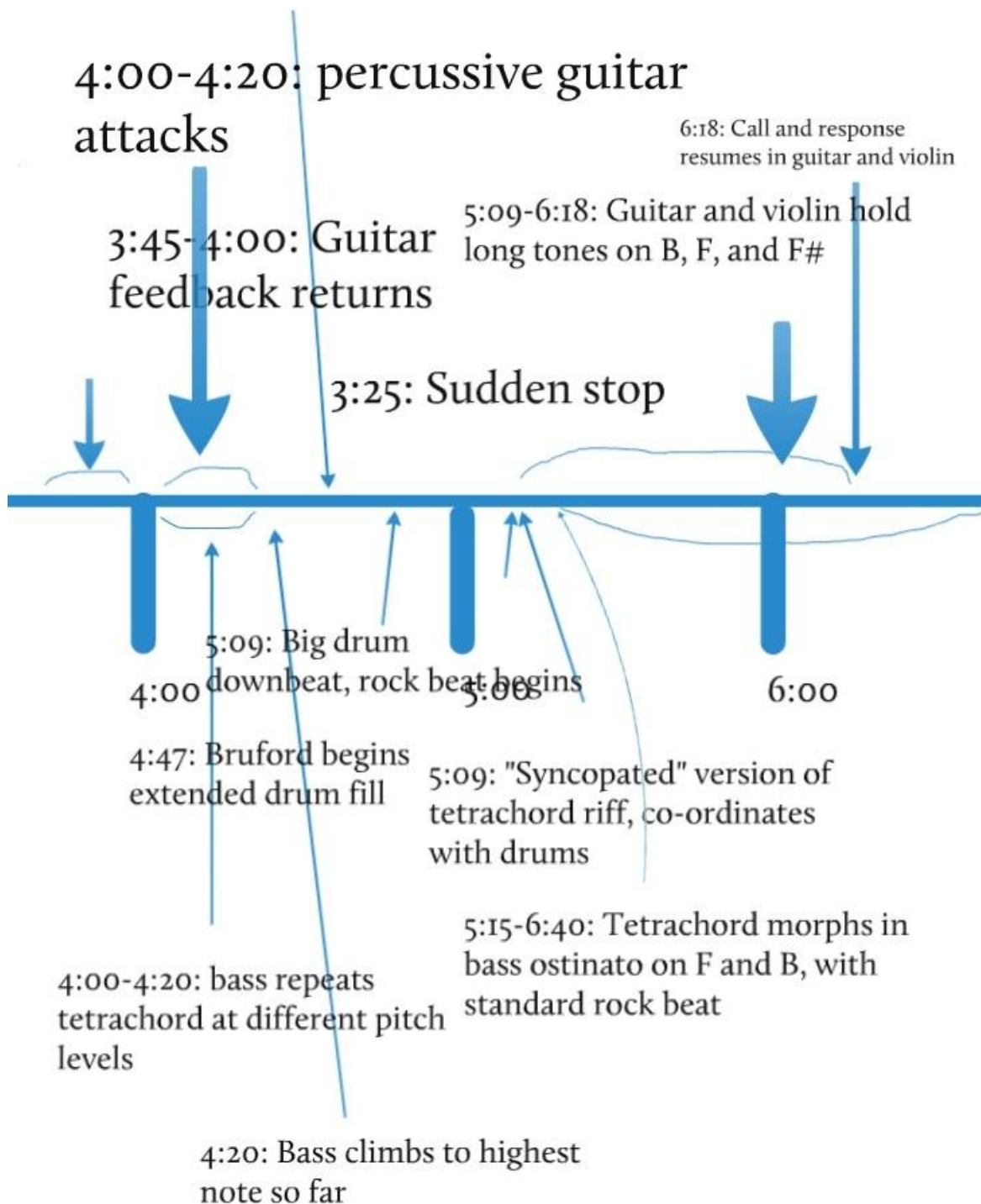
0:57 Low guitar
feedback on F

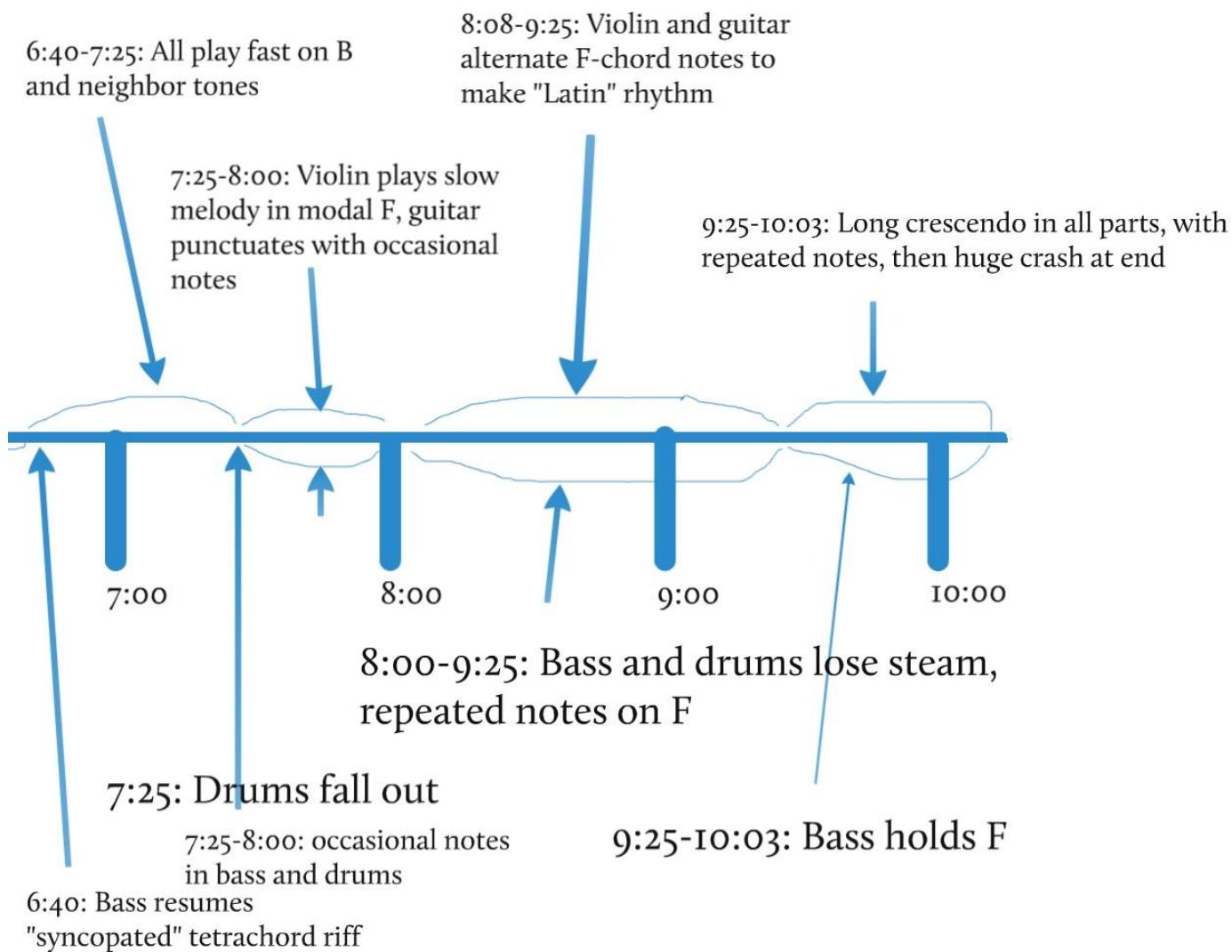
1:50-3:00: Call and response between
mellotron and violin



3:00: Bass enters again with
tetrachord. Drums increase
frequency of attacks.

4:35: Violin echoes bass climb





Bibliography

Interviews and other primary sources

Batt, David. "Out of Exile: An Interview with David Cross." *Entertainment Today* April 24th, 1998: 42-44. Recovered from <http://www.elephant-talk.com/wiki/Interview_with_David_Cross_in_Entertainment_Today>, March 3rd, 2012.

Bruford, Bill. *The Autobiography*. London: Jawbone Press, 2009.

----- . Interview with author. Kansas City, Missouri, October 20th, 2011.

----- . Lecture. Percussive Arts Society International Conference. Columbus, Ohio, November 13th, 1993. Recorded by Steve Riley.

Hunter-Tilney, Ludovic. "The Day the Music Died: An Interview with Robert Fripp." *The Financial Times*. August 3rd, 2012. Recovered from <<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/f588e100-d7ee-11e1-9980-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2Cb8ayyx3>>, September 15th, 2012.

Leroy, Aymeric. "An Interview with Ian McDonald." *Big Bang Magazine* August 25th, 1999: 30-31. Recovered from <http://www.elephant-talk.com/wiki/Interview_with_Ian_McDonald_in_Big_Bang_Magazine>, June 27th, 2012.

Partridge, Robert. "An Interview with Robert Fripp." *Melody Maker* October 5th, 1974: 22-24. Recovered from <http://www.elephant-talk.com/wiki/Interview_with_Robert_Fripp_in_Melody_Maker_%281974%29>, October 11th, 2011.

Speier, Sheila. "Interview with David Cross." In *Circus Raves*, September 1974. Retrieved from <http://www.elephant-talk.com/wiki/Interview_with_David_Cross_in_Circus-Raves>, January 3rd, 2012.

Secondary sources

Cairns, David. *Berlioz: Volume Two: Servitude and Greatness, 1832-1869*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999.

Christgau, Robert. Review of *In the Court of the Crimson King*. <http://www.robertchristgau.com/get_artist.php?id=748&name=King+Crimson> (accessed January 5, 2012).

Dancha, Kim. *My Own Time: The Authorized Biography of John Wetton*. Schnecksville, PA: Northern Line, 1997.

- Dean, Roger. *New Structures in Jazz and Improvised Music Since 1960*. Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1992.
- Fellezs, Kevin. *Birds of Fire: Jazz, Rock, Funk, and the Creation of Fusion*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011.
- Gridley, Mark C. *Jazz Styles: History and Analysis*. 6th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1997.
- Hegarty, Paul, and Martin Halliwell. *Beyond and Before: Progressive Rock Since the 1960s*. New York: Continuum International Publishing, 2011.
- Hodson, Robert. *Interaction, Improvisation, and Interplay in Jazz*. New York: Routledge, 2007.
- Karl, Gregory. "King Crimson's Larks' Tongues in Aspic." In *Progressive Rock Reconsidered*, ed. Kevin Holm-Hudson. New York: Routledge, 2002. 121-142.
- Litweiler, John. *Ornette Coleman: A Harmelodic Life*. New York: W. Morrow, 1992.
- Macan, Edward. *Rocking the Classics: English Progressive Rock and the Counterculture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Mandel, Howard. *Miles, Ornette, Cecil: Jazz Beyond Jazz*. New York: Routledge, 2008.
- Martin, Bill. *Avant Rock: Experimental Music from the Beatles to Björk*. Chicago: Open Court Publishing, 2002.
- Monson, Ingrid. *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction*. Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1996.
- Moore, Allen. *Rock: The Primary Text*. Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1993.
- Peterson, Lloyd. *Music and the Creative Spirit: Innovators in Jazz, Improvisation, and the Avant Garde*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2006.
- Smith, Sid. *In the Court of King Crimson*. New York: Helter Skelter Publishing, 2002.
- Stump, Paul. *The Music's All that Matters: A History of Progressive Rock*. London: Quartet Books, 1997.
- Tamm, Eric. *Robert Fripp: From King Crimson to Guitar Craft*. Boston: Faber and Faber, 1990.
- Walser, Robert. *Running With the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music*. Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1993.

Musical Recordings

- Giles, Giles and Fripp. *The Cheerful Insanity of Giles, Giles, and Fripp*. Deram SPA 423. Vinyl. 1968.

- King Crimson. *In the Court of the Crimson King*. Island ILPS 9111. Vinyl. 1969.
- , *In the Wake of Poseidon*. Atlantic SD 8266. Vinyl. 1970.
- , *Lizard*. Atlantic SD 8266. Vinyl. 1970.
- , *Islands*. Atlantic SD 7212. Vinyl. 1971.
- , *Earthbound*. Polydor Special 2343 092. Vinyl. 1972.
- , *Larks' Tongues in Aspic*. Atlantic SD 7923. Vinyl. 1973.
- , *Starless and Bible Black*. Atlantic SD 7298. Vinyl. 1974.
- , *Red*. Atlantic SD 18110. Vinyl. 1974.
- , *USA*. Atlantic SD 18136. Vinyl. 1975.
- , *The Young Person's Guide to King Crimson*. Atlantic 2SDS 900Q. Vinyl. 1976.
- , *The Great Deceiver*. Discipline Global Mobile DGM9904. CD. 1992.
- , *Epitaph*. Discipline Global Mobile DGM9607. CD. 1997.
- , *The Night Watch: Live in Amsterdam November 23rd 1973*. Discipline Global Mobile DGM9707. CD. 1997.
- , *Live at the Marquee July 6th 1969*. Discipline Global Mobile CLUB1. CD. 1998.
- , *Live at Central Park 1974*. Discipline Global Mobile CLUB10. CD. 1999.
- , *Live in Kassel April 1st 1974*. Discipline Global Mobile CLUB36. CD. 2001.
- , *Live in Zurich November 15th 1973*. Discipline Global Mobile CLUB41. CD. 2002.
- , Live in Chesterfield, England, 1969. Bootleg recording.
- , Live in Bremen, Germany, 1972. Bootleg recording.
- McDonald and Giles. *McDonald and Giles*. Cotillion SD 9042. Vinyl. 1971.
- Sonic Youth. *Daydream Nation*. DGC/Geffen Records DGCD-24515. CD. 1988.