

Welcome to the New Age

In The New Age – The Atlantic Recordings 1988-1995, Kings X (6CD, Cherry Red)

The band I end up comparing Kings X too are Thin Lizzy, but that does both bands a disservice. It's mostly because I can't think of any other hard rock bands who write great melodies and harmonize so well, but Kings X have the edge, because of the way psychedelia, funk and a bit of soul creep into their music, at times softening what often gets called alt.rock or progressive metal.

Each of these six albums – their first six – gets the bonus track treatment (often live versions, but sometimes B-sides, edits or alternative versions; nothing major) and comes in an individual sleeve. The set clearly charts the changes, ambition and growth of the band, from C.S. Lewis inspired sci-fi concept album to grungier climes, at which point they changed label.

Out of the Silent Planet (the C.S. Lewis novel) underpinned that first album, one I confess has never grabbed me. It sounds like a thin version of Rush's *2112*, one without the complex layered guitars. The religious subtext of some of the songs meant the band got labelled a christian rock band, however hard they tried to say they were not, simply guys interested in faith, doubt and spirituality.

Their second album, *Gretchen Goes to Nebraska*, continued to explore those themes, and included a song that shared its title with their debut album. Again, I find it hard to hear much in it, but the next album, *Faith Hope Love*, felt like a massive step away from where they had started from. A mix of the anthemic ('It's Love' and the title track), hard rocking, and free-er tracks such as 'Moanjam' (which would become a consistent highlight live, with extended jamming), paved the way for critical and live success, perhaps proving that their song title 'We Were Born to be Loved' was true.

1992's *King's X* was more back to basics. Some gentler moments like the intro to 'The Big Picture' punctuate a pretty standard hard rock album, which riffs and bludgeons its way into the listener's head. Despite consistently outstanding bass playing and guitar solos, it comes across as tired and samey, in contrast to concert recordings which show the band in top form. *Dogman*, released two years ago is a different beast altogether though! It comes in at top volume and with maximum creativity on the title track, then we get a further engagement with the notion of 'truth' on 'Shoes', which is full of vocal layering, guitars and energy.

Dogman is one of my favourite King's X album. It's heavy but filled with light and shade; it's loud but also offers moments of emotional quiet and pensive thought. It aches, groans, screams and celebrates, and points the way to the final album in this box set, *Ear Candy*. Clothed in psychedelic graphics and photos, this album is even better than its predecessor. I'm not a big fan of drumming but the subtle playing which underpins the music here is outstanding, as are the changing dynamics and

textures of the acoustic guitar and treated electric guitars. There's a groove here, which softens the edge of some tracks, as does the foregrounding of the vocals. Sometimes the music even gets bluesy or – dare I say it – proggy for a few moments. The general tone is melancholic and questioning, the sound warm and embracing (although I have seen weird reviews that say the sound is dry and cold!), the production exemplary. It's a knockout album, one that ended the band's tenure at Atlantic Records, one that ends with the contemplative 'Life Going By', which not only contains an outstanding guitar solo but details Doug Pinnick's own sense of foreboding, doubt, transcendence and freedom.

I'm not much of a heavy metal or hard rock fan but King's X are an exception. Their music is original, different, accomplished and beguiling. This box is a great way to encounter their first few albums.

Rupert Loydell