

Oh me! Oh my! What's a poor boy supposed to do? Well for one thing you don't NOT go and see a performer and songwriter of the calibre of Sting no matter what you may think of his image. You know what I mean? Boring old Sting who's into jazz and save the forests. Hell, He even sings about love! Detestable bastard. How dare he! Why don't singers like him just roll over and die and let the new race just get on with it? Well I've got news for you. The more things change the more things stay the same. I'll say it again, only a little louder, just in case you didn't get it the first time. **THE MORE THINGS CHANGE THE MORE THEY STAY THE SAME!**

Let me explain what I mean. We were on the way to Sting's sold out show at the Newcastle Entertainment Centre. To while away the time on the train I was reading a new book by Craig Mathieson about silverchair, Spiderbait and You Am I. It's called *Hi Fi Days* and it's all about the changing of the guard that's supposed to be occurring within the rock industry.

When we stepped off the train, the night was typical of Newcastle just after a southerly has blown up. A quick pressure drop had let the mercury fall just enough to cool the place down and the air put a tingle on our skin. We left the platform and headed down the underpass keen to slip into the warmth generated by a few thousand people eager for a glimpse of the man who had been at the forefront of popular music during the early Eighties. Just a few weeks before, the subway tunnel that runs under Broadmeadow station had seen the departure of some old and not so old punks reliving the glory days of punk. The negative ambience of the Sex Pistols had been hanging in the air after their show and the cement was wet and forbidding. The scene could just as easily have been the setting for the droogs from *A Clockwork Orange* to partake in a little nighttime amusement, beating and bashing just for the sheer nihilistic glory of it.

As we emerged from the tunnel and headed for the Entertainment Centre I was thinking of all this. Sting, the Sex Pistols, Spiderbait and silverchair. Apart from the astounding alliteration I was wondering what else they had in common and oddly enough the song that wouldn't leave my mind was the Who's 'My Generation'. You all know the famous line that Pete Townshend lived to regret... 'hope I die before I get old!'

So we got to the foyer of the pristine barn that passes for the biggest venue in Newcastle and, as is befitting of all good rock shows, we couldn't help spotting the celebrity. Grant Walmsley from the Screaming Jets was locked in conversation with the promoter, no doubt scaring up some action, and also keen to see Sting. We were keen to find our seats.

Unlike the preceding Bush show and the Sex Pistols show this one was sold out. A full house. No empty seats. Packed. You see Sting had achieved what few of those who have ambitions in the music scene have come anywhere near achieving. As the chief songwriter and face for the Police he helped introduce a new amalgam of music to the world in a cold blast of shimmering instrumentation that left those of us who were aware breathless with its innovation. The Police rode into rock history on the image of punk but they owed a massive debt to the third world. They crossed reggae with the aggression of the new wave and produced

Sting

FALLING WITH MERCURY

Story by Johnnie Clott



hit after hit of intelligent music - *Message in A Bottle*, *Walking On the Moon*, *Don't Stand So Close*, *Spirits in The Material World* and the list goes on.

They did it the hard way too, initially working outside established industry practices. They toured America, before they were 'supposed' to, in a crowded van doing their own setting up and lugging, sleeping together in fleapit hotels all over the Eastern Seaboard of the U.S. They recorded fast, effectively and cheaply and owed the record company nothing. They put up with jealous invective by the 'real' punks but they came to be loved by a hell of a lot of record buyers so what did it matter anyway. They toured the world including places off the beaten rock paths. India welcomed them and Egypt caused a few worries, but their forays into some of the dictator riddled countries of South America led to riots and arrests. Sting could live up to his name spitting out vitriol with the best of them. America too had succumbed to Police fever and by the time they recorded their fifth album, the cold blast of whistling wind called *Synchronicity*, they were the biggest band in the world.

They were a three piece band who sang about disenchantment and suicide and loneliness and the way the world had been left by a prior generation. They were young and angry and a breath of fresh air. They were above all a great rock and roll band. Any of this sound familiar yet?

As I sat waiting for Sting to appear all this was flicking through my brain. What had he done after the Police? Well for one thing his solo greatest hits album is as long as The Police's. Like McCartney after the demise of the Beatles, Sting had successfully reinvented himself. Like McCartney he suffered the blast of a critical backlash and became the whipping

boy for a new generation. It became fashionable to snigger at Sting especially as he involved himself in causes like saving the Brazilian rainforest and performing for Amnesty International. After the massive success of *The Dream of the Blue Turtles* album that was released during the peak of the Anti-Nuclear protests his music veered closer and closer to the jazz he had performed before entering the pop world. As he explored the deeper moods he was experiencing as an older rock

A COOL STING

artist, his music became imbued with a subtle and ethereal melancholy. And still the records sold.

Then the lights went down and Sting strode onto the stage with his old Fender bass, looking every inch in charge, older but more graceful, physically fit and impressive in basic black. The first of the songs from his new album filled the air. These cats had their shit together. The drummer, Vinnie Colliuta, handled the versatile and complex material with ease and Dominic Miller was the consummate sideman on his guitar, playing every note in exactly the way Sting had arranged it. After they'd ranged through the well crafted narrative of *Hang My Head* Sting let the crowd know that he too had grown up in Newcastle. Newcastle on Tyne in England that is. How come we had suburbs named Sandgate and Jesmond and Wallsend? He'd grown up in Wallsend. And the weather was warmer there he joked. He'd been twenty years on the road and the only song that made him homesick was the one he was about to sing called *Fields of Gold*.

It is a beautiful song that captures the lingering sadness of a long gone past and the Entertainment Centre relaxed into a contemplative listening mode. This introspection proved to be the major source of tension during the evening. Whether it be nobler to follow the finer points of this subtle music or simply rock out. That was the question.

Halfway through the show Sting let loose one of his back catalogue for the rousing *Every Little Thing She Does is Magic*. This reading made the hair on my arms stand on end but I don't know whether it was me meeting my past or the musicians doing a remarkable job. *Roxanne*, the song that first made Sting's reputation, then sidled it's way into an extended jam on a mad and wild samba with the band and the crowd happy to be here.

But the older songs seemed to be missing both the jangled obliqueness and unbridled edginess that had become obligatory from Sting's former Police partners, Andy Summers and Stewart Copeland. By the time Sting's band got to *Every Breath You Take* they were sounding decidedly pedestrian and it was easy to tell they were keen to move onto newer and more challenging pastures. So they did and hammered into some more tunes from the *Mercury Falling* album.

Kenny Kirkland was the favoured son of the crowd and it was obvious he was enjoying himself, smiling and amused at the unique place he occupied as Sting deferred to his jazz pedigree. He let loose a keyboard solo that veered close to losing the beauty of the melody before he hammered home the basic rhythm and forced the band to work harder than they had for some time.

As I looked around at the crowd, trying to figure what sort of people were here whooping and hollering, it dawned on me that we were sitting in the middle of the mainstream. I'd followed Sting through all the twists and turns of his career from the early punk days and here we were right smack bang in the middle of the river of humanity that makes up the biggest audience in the world. And then I remembered reading Craig Mathieson's story on Spiderbait where Janet, the bass player, explains that they'd had a similar experience. The whole band travelled down to Melbourne to see The Police on their farewell tour. 'We thought we were cutting edge. We thought we were the only people in the world who knew who the Police were. But there were 50,000 other people there.' Sting had taken us all with him on his journey when the world had last turned and now there was another in the long line of periodic seismic shifts in the mainstream. Along the way he had faced the same questions that bands like You Am I and Spiderbait and silverchair are now facing. Can an artist survive if half the fans who've travelled with them so far want to cling to old visions and they want to move on? How do you keep your muse open and alive to experimentation? What happens if you don't die before you get old?

As we headed back to the train station down through the subway tunnel another song swirled around my head. Further back I could hear, echoing around the concrete and slipping over the excited buzz of the post show crowd making their way home, someone else also singing, 'How fragile we are, how fragile we are!'