

PORTRAIT

## How Sting continues to reinvent himself and his music

"If I have a spirituality at all, it's about music. I play and I listen to music as if it really matters to my soul, to my eternal being." (Sting)

Life for Gordon Matthew Thomas Sumner has consisted of self-made opportunities complementing his talent and ambition. The first indication of good fortune may well have been the fact that he was born in Newcastle upon Tyne in the north of England. "The sexual revolution only got as far as Leeds", he recently quipped in an interview, but to compensate, Newcastle's lively jazz and rock scene produced a bedrock of the British blues scene in the form of Eric Burdon, and it was also here that Brian Johnson grew into the role of his life, having been the lead singer of AC/DC since Bon Scott died in 1980. In the 1970s, the industrial city in the north of England offered a great many opportunities for young musicians to perform – from pubs and various jazz clubs to the concert hall.

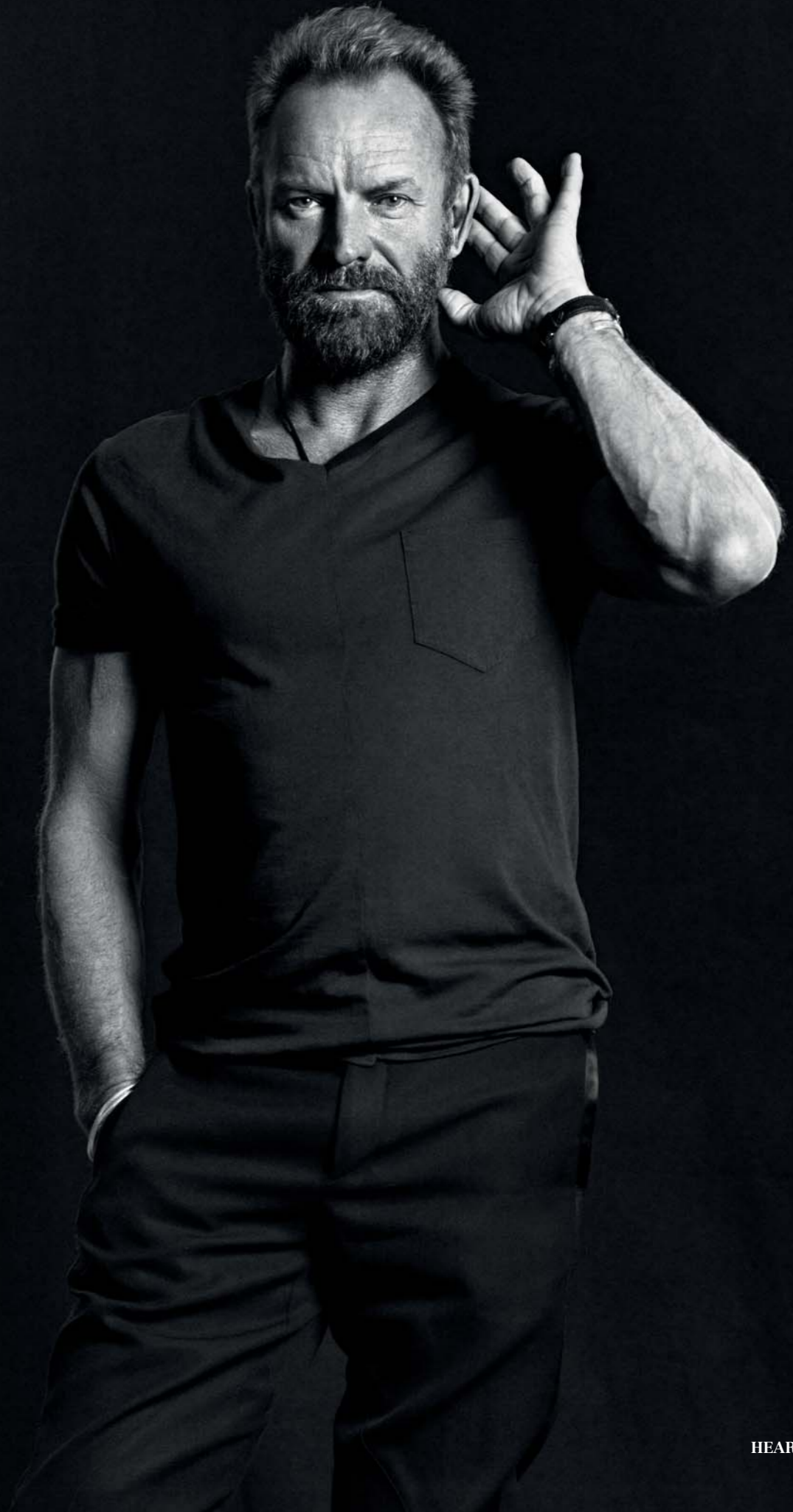
From the very beginning, Sumner's greatest asset was his distinctive voice. Yet it was not this that gave Gordon the nickname "Sting", but rather a bandmate who poked fun at his black-and-yellow striped sweater at a jam session, saying: "Gordon's got a sting!" It was certainly also no mistake that the former ditch digger, soccer coach and English teacher learnt to play the bass and several other instruments very well, on the side. In the mid-1970s, Sting decided to end his career as a school teacher in favor of making music, "and one of the irons I had in the fire was the phone number of this American drummer called Stewart Copeland. He had seen me play in Newcastle with my band and said, 'If you ever come down to London, give me a call'. It was the only number I had (in London), so I called him." The two met at a squat in Mayfair and "there we founded The Police". Stewart's brother Miles became the band's first manager, and together with guitarist Henry Padovani, the trio had an instant hit with the single *Fall Out* on the independent label IRS. However, it was only when distinguished session guitarist Andy Summers joined the band (he had previously played with bands including Eric Burdon's Animals and Zoot Money) that the line-up was complete.

The rest, as they say, is history. Unlike many bands of the punk and New Wave era, The Police could not only play their instruments extremely well, but all the members had also previously worked intensively with blues, rock, reggae and jazz music before jointly creating a musical amalgam. Even today, all the major Police songs from *Roxanne* to *Message in a Bottle* and *Walking On the Moon* to *Every Breath You Take* still convey the impression that no note or chord is superfluous, while Sting's razor-sharp, versatile voice dances above it all like a samurai sword. Within just five years, The Police produced as many albums, often with unusual titles such as *Regatta de Blanc* or *Zenyatta Mondatta*, and won Grammy Awards. The band's last and most successful album, *Synchronicity*, held the top spot in the US charts for an amazing 17 weeks. They took a break after the subsequent world tour, which, however, resulted in the dissolution of the band. They regrouped only for the odd charity concert and their induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2003. Even the hugely successful world tour by The Police in 2007 did not lead to a lasting reunion.

And it was just this first phase of his career that would forecast the astonishing inventiveness and range of influences Sting would fully realize as a solo artist. He has since evolved into one of the world's most highly respected performers, collecting an additional eleven Grammy Awards, and receiving a CBE. Throughout the years, he has also used his music and his voice in support of political and humanitarian rights.

Even before the "The Police" chapter had provisionally come to an end, Sting attracted attention with his first solo outings. In 1981, he played four concerts entitled *The Secret Policeman's Other Ball* for Amnesty International, with Eric Clapton, Phil Collins and the future organizer of Live Aid, Bob Geldof (Boomtown Rats) in his "accompanying band". Naturally, Sting was also involved in Bob Geldof's Live Aid project (with virtually the same line-up) and in 2007, performed live with The Police at the even bigger successor project Live Earth, not least also to support the "Rainforest Foundation" that he and his wife Trudie Styler founded in 1989.

Photo: Bryan Adams



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In 1985, Sting was the first ex-Police member to release a solo album; the first in a series of surprising yet successful career moves. He recorded *The Dream of the Blue Turtles* with distinguished jazz musicians such as Branford Marsalis, Omar Hakim and Kenny Kirkland, and put a decidedly funky spin on the first single *If You Love Somebody, Set Them Free*. Two years later he once again achieved global success with the single *Englishman in New York* and the album *Nothing Like the Sun*. The albums *The Soul Cages* (1991) and *Ten Summoner's Tales* (1993) were also international hits.

Occasional collaborations and guest appearances with other bands, such as his legendary “I want my MTV” in Dire Straits’ megahit *Money For Nothing* (1985) became part of his everyday life as a superstar, yet even among the highlights there are especially outstanding moments. In 1993, Sting sang *All for Love* for the film *The Three Musketeers* together with Rod Stewart and Bryan Adams. Following the release of *Mercury Falling* (1996), three years later, Sting returned to top form with *Brand New Day*, which featured the hit single *Desert Rose*, a collaboration with Algerian singer Cheb Mami. The song is unquestionably one of the strongest performances of his solo career. For his next album, *Sacred Love*, he invited R&B singer Mary J. Blige and Anoushka Shankar, whose sitar-playing highlights a previously unimagined quality in Sting’s music, to perform with him.

Throughout his career Sting has never been afraid to blaze the path of new musical territory, as he recently said in an interview: “Over the years I have found out what my job actually is, and my interests are wide-ranging. I like classical music, I like pop, jazz and I also like folklore, and I try to create something new from all these traditions.” However, Sting, now 58 years old, has no intention of limiting himself to folk and classical music in future; no, he is keeping his options open and says: “I have no idea what is next” – and, we might add, that is a good thing too.

Sting’s foray into the classical realm began with the crossover success of his first #1 album *Songs from the Labyrinth*, a lute-based interpretation of the music of John Dowland, released in 2006 on Deutsche Grammophon. Sting continued to pursue his passion for uniting musical genres with his most recent release *If On A Winter’s Night...*

which debuted at #1 on Billboard’s classical chart and remains there. Sting’s acclaimed classical musical ventures were further complemented by an invitation to perform with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in 2008. After reworking selections from his expansive catalog, he and several members of his band joined the orchestra in a performance that left an indelible mark on Sting. Eager to explore the possibilities of further symphonic collaboration, Sting was thrilled when the Philadelphia Orchestra asked him to join them in commemoration of the 153rd anniversary of the Academy of Music earlier this year.

Consequently, Sting, accompanied by the prestigious Royal Philharmonic Concert Orchestra, will embark on a world tour this summer. The tour will find Sting performing his most celebrated songs, re-imagined for symphonic arrangement. The 45-piece orchestra will be conducted by Maestro Steven Mercurio.

Sting supports *Hear the World*, a global initiative which promotes awareness about hearing and educates people about the consequences of hearing loss. In this role, Sting has now joined the ranks of such prominent ambassadors as Jude Law, Harry Belafonte, Diane Kruger, Lenny Kravitz, Annie Lennox and Peter Gabriel, among others. All of them have been photographed by Bryan Adams in the conscious hearing pose, with one hand behind their ear. “Our hearing is not only integral to how we communicate, but also how we experience the world around us”, says Sting. “I hope that by supporting this initiative, I can encourage people to value the sounds they hear and to conscientiously protect their hearing.”