

## Sting

Two years ago, Sting found himself in the extremely difficult position of having to perform a show on the grounds of his home in Italy on a day that will live in infamy: September 11, 2001. “It was the last thing I wanted to do,” he says, “but people had come from all over the world to see this show in my backyard, and I felt they needed some kind of therapy, just to be together.” The gripping intimacy of that show was documented by the live album and DVD, ...All This Time, which came out soon afterwards.

Since then, like all of us, Sting has had many occasions to ponder the meaning of that fateful day. “I had to consider my position as a songwriter,” he says. “What do I write about? I didn’t want to write specifically about that situation at all, but when I look back on the songs that I’ve written since then, there is this mood of import. There’s something happening in the human spirit, and we’re all connected to it, whether you’re American or British or from the Islamic world. We’re connected to some energy in the world, and we need to sort out what it is.”

For Sting, the name of that energy is embodied in the title of his new album: Sacred Love. “Every man, every woman/Every race, every nation/It all comes down to this/Sacred love,” he sings on the exuberant title track. Other songs on the album demonstrate how the failure to love can lead to self-deception and betrayal, to irrational fear and cataclysmic violence. But what finally comes through is the truth that all soul singers know: Love can save the day.

Still, writing songs about love hardly constitutes an artistic breakthrough – particularly for Sting, who has written some of the best, and some of the eeriest, love songs of our time. Love may be the answer, but if it is to regain its rightful power in our lives, it will need to be rescued from the clichés that have eroded its meaning. Sting sets out to do that from the very start on “Inside,” the album’s opening track. “Inside the doors are sealed to love,” the song begins, and that fortress will need to come down for love to do its work.

“I often think the words ‘I love you’ have been misused by people,” Sting explains one afternoon in Paris, where he recorded the album. “What does it mean? ‘Inside’ is a song about someone who’s been hurt in love and is under siege and hiding away from the world. I think our society encourages that. We live in gated communities, and we’re terrified of the world outside. But there’s a storm raging at the gates, and sooner or later you’re going to have to open the door and deal with it.”

The very language Sting uses to describe that character’s plight – “under siege,” “terrified of the world,” “a storm raging at the gates” – gets at one of Sacred Love’s most compelling aspects. Among its other ambitions, the album is a bold attempt to weave meaningful connections between the struggles within the souls of individual people and the larger events wracking our social and political worlds. That goal makes perfect sense, given the album’s genesis. Sacred Love was recorded during the agonizing build-up to the war on Iraq, and the urgency of that time suffuses the entire album -- most grippingly on “This War.” “There’s a war on our compassion,” he sings, “There’s a war on

understanding/There's a war on love and life itself/It's war that they're demanding." A stirring cry of protest, the song rests on a single pointed question: "Yes, you may win this coming battle/But could you tolerate the peace?"

Similarly, if far more playfully, "Forget About the Future" – with its unforgettably sardonic kicker line, "So forget about the future, honey/Let's get on with the past" -- compares a couple determined to relive every painful battle of their relationship to the squabbling countries at the United Nations. In both cases, "They opened up all the wounds of the past/As they failed to see their way to the future."

Along with the title track, "Send Your Love" provides a counterweight to the dark motives evident at the heart of "This War." Against the fundamentalist thugs of any faith who attempt to strangle joy in its cradle, Sting evokes a sensual vision of human salvation. "There's no religion but sex and music," he sings over the song's swirling, driving rhythms, "There's no religion but sound and dancing... There's no religion but sacred trance."

"I just felt that, in light of September 11th and its aftermath, religion had a lot to answer for," Sting says. "It's been used in a very narrow political sense to close down who we are. It's another term that needed to be redefined. So I asked myself, what are my religions? Well, music is one, and the other is love – romantic love, sexual love. They're both ways of approaching eternity, infinity, the impossible things that we simply can't understand. They give us a window onto that – and God created them both!"

On a less philosophical, more carnal note, Sting and Mary J. Blige's smoldering duet on the ballad "Whenever I Say Your Name" also traces the links between sex, religion and music in its affecting line, "Whenever I say your name, I'm already praying."

"That's not romantic gobbledygook," Sting insists. "It's real. If you love somebody, it's a religious experience. Mary and I play these roles in that song; we're in a relationship that's both co-dependent and necessary. As a singer, Mary really is the heir to Aretha Franklin, and I had to bring myself up to that mark. She's so passionate that it brought out the passion in me. I'm English, after all, and we find it very difficult to be passionate. We need a little help!"

Inspired by Sting's work on a forthcoming autobiography, "The Book of My Life" is the sort of brooding, introspective ballad that the singer has defined throughout his career. Anoushka Shankar's sitar summons an atmosphere of mystery at the song's beginning, like the unsettling feeling of encountering yourself in a dream, as song's main character reluctantly digs in the dirt of his buried memories. "There are promises broken and promises kept," the lyrics run. "There are words that were spoken when I should have wept... There's some sorrow in every life."

"Dead Man's Rope," too, found its spark while Sting was writing the book of his life. "That song to me is about death," he says plainly. "I had the image of a man suspended on a rope between heaven and hell, suspended in a 'well of memory.' Having fallen into

the well of memory when I was working on my book, I know how it feels, and it's not all pleasant.

"The other image in the song," he continues, "is of a man walking, day after day, a lifetime of walking away from responsibilities, from his pain, hoping it will go away. But at some point you have to be in one place and deal with reality, and that's where 'Dead Man's Rope' is. Once you've accepted that, then comfort arrives. You can't walk away from everything. I've tried."

"Never Coming Home," finally, is a dramatic set-piece that finds a woman at a crossroads in her life, like the man in "Dead Man's Rope," in a sense. Her decision to claim her personal freedom is told from three perspectives – hers, her husband's, and an omniscient narrator's. "I have sympathy for both characters, I really do," Sting says. "They are characters I will revisit later."

To make *Sacred Love*, Sting teamed up once again with Kipper, the keyboards and programming mastermind who also co-produced *Brand New Day* and ...*All This Time*. Along with Kipper and guests like Mary J. Blige and Anoushka Shankar, the players include many longtime members of Sting's musical family, including guitarist Dominic Miller, keyboardist Jason Rebello, trumpeter Chris Botti and drummer Manu Katche.

There isn't much point at this juncture in rehearsing all of Sting's accomplishments. Both as a solo artist and with the Police, he's written some of the best songs of our time and sold many, many millions of records. It's more newsworthy at this point to proclaim that he's working at the very height of his powers on *Sacred Love*, that, once again, he's made an album that is fun and provocative, serious and moving, a telling commentary on our lives and our times.

"Mentally, this was a very tough record to make," Sting admits. "At first, I just wasn't in the mood to write songs. Then, because of what was going on in the world - the threat of war after September 11th, and the actual war happening -- it definitely was a difficult time to be creative. You wonder - what on Earth am I doing this for? What bearing does this have on reality? And of course a lot of the themes of what's happening in the world come into the record unconsciously.

"So there's a certain amount of confusion and dread on the record, as well as a great deal of joy and hope," he concludes. "I think in that sense it's a realistic record. I'm not denying anything."